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**Constructions of Identity in Contemporary African Drama:
A Comparative Study of Wole Soyinka and Zakes Mda**

Oladipo Agboluaje

Dissertation presented for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the Open University

June 2003

Department of Literature

Open University

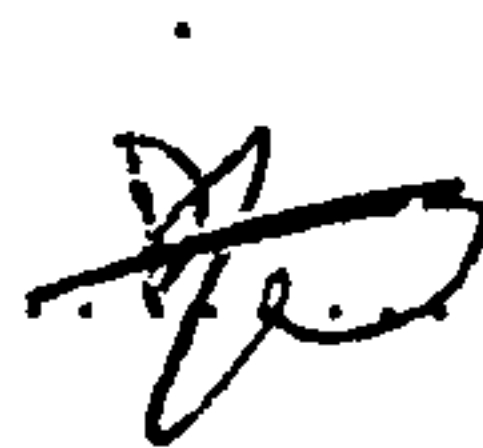
Thesis no.: T115 9417
Submission date: 24 April 2003
Award date: 24 July 2003

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines identity constructions in contemporary African drama, through a comparative study of Wole Soyinka of Nigeria and Zakes Mda of South Africa. Soyinka and Mda construct African identities from an Afrocentric, universal humanism. Both dramatists locate African identities in the interaction between the individual and the community, which allows for a heterogeneity of African identities. Their different ideas about how African identities are formed arise from the specific social, historical conditions of their respective African contexts. Soyinka's identity constructions are essentialist, deriving from ethnic myth and history. Soyinka's essential African identity varies through social experience. Mda grounds his constructions of African identity in the material experience of apartheid. Mda privileges class over ethnic myth and history. My comparison of the two dramatists and their work reveals how colonialism is implicated in ethnic as well as materialist accounts of African identity. The works of Soyinka and Mda illustrate how African identities vary according to a complexity of social and historical conditions. My conclusion is that notions of African identity are rendered from the personal perspective of the dramatist, perspectives derived from local experience, which is influenced by colonialism.

DECLARATION:

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this dissertation is my own original work and I have not previously in its entirety or in part, submitted it at any university for a degree.

Signature: .....

Date: 30 - 6 - 03

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my late father, Prince Olaniyi Ajisomo Agboluaje,
and my mother Mrs Iyabode Titilola Agboluaje.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the following people for their support during the period of writing this thesis:

The Open University for making the funds possible for this thesis to be written in the first place.

My supervisors Professor Dennis Walder, Dr Robert Fraser and Dr David Johnson for their guidance and friendship.

The non-academic staff of the Faculty of Arts and the Department of Literature for all their kind assistance during the course of completing this thesis.

Dr Kwadwo Osei-Nyame Jr. of SOAS for the fruitful advice and discussions that took place regularly during the writing of this thesis.

Dr Peter Wilson of the London Metropolitan University who was always there when I needed to talk to someone.

Ndubuisi Anike, John Maclean, Pat Waller, Anthony Costello, Rose Codling and Nasika Pace, my good friends, who helped me to cope with the loneliness of writing a thesis.

My brother, Wale, for being the best brother in the world.

My sister, Titi, for being the best sister in the world.

Introduction

The subject of this thesis is constructions of identity in contemporary African drama. I make a comparative study of two dramatists from West and Southern Africa. As I will show, colonialism complicates the notion of an ‘authentic’ identity in African drama. Authenticity is a vexed and complex matter. I will show how far colonialism, through indirect rule, accounts for the different approaches the two dramatists adopt in constructing African identities. Their personal perspectives of ‘authentic’ African identities is influenced by the colonial histories of their respective nations.

Wole Soyinka (Nigeria) and Zakes Mda (South Africa) both construct African identities from an Afrocentric universal humanism. Their works belong to what Tejumola Olaniyan terms the ‘post-Afrocentric’ (Olaniyan, 1995: 11). Post-Afrocentrism interrogates both Eurocentric assumptions about Africa, and Afrocentric claims of a monolithic identity. Afrocentrism’s claim of an African monolithic identity is the result of its binary opposition with Eurocentric colonial discourse. Soyinka and Mda interrogate binary discourse by critiquing Negritude and Black Consciousness respectively.

By critiquing two major Afrocentric theories, Soyinka and Mda challenge the identity of the individual African against an assumed collective identity of Africa, of which blackness is its only manifestation. Both writers accept that African cultures privilege group identity over individual identity. At the same time, Soyinka and Mda trace authentic identity, as group experience, to individual experience. Soyinka constructs the

uniqueness of African identity on an essential, mythic individual of special qualities. This individual's attributes reflect the unique characteristics of Ogun, Yoruba god of iron. The Yorubas' understanding of myth and history is interdiscursive, as illustrated in oral traditions and described in Samuel Johnson's *History of the Yorubas* (1921). Soyinka's own notion of history and myth is flexible and active. The Yoruba world-view is holistic and circular. Soyinka identifies this feature of Yoruba history as characteristic of African history and culture. For Soyinka, authentic African identity formations therefore follow a similar pattern as the one he constructs from Yoruba history.

Soyinka's essentialist construction of African identities raises certain issues for critics. Commentators like Booth (1981), Etherton (1982) and Gibbs (1986) see Soyinka's construction of identities as politically engaging, anti-ideology, humanistic and varied. Soyinka's humanism is the overriding feature. Critics like Appiah (1992), Ngugi (1984) and Osofisan (1982) see his works as ahistorical, pessimistic, nativistic and ambiguous. For Ngugi and Appiah, colonialism cannot be excluded from the material and spiritual experience of modern Africa. The idea of an essential African identity is locked within the material effects of colonialism.

Mda, like Soyinka, espouses an Afrocentric universal humanism. Mda claims that he is 'a person of the world' (Mda, 1997: 258). During the apartheid period, Mda experienced indirectly the effects of race oppression while in exile in Lesotho. Exile affects Mda's writings during the 1970s-1980s, when Black Consciousness was the dominant liberation discourse among black South Africans. Mda's plays remain within the Black

Consciousness framework, in that they lay emphasis on conscientisation. Mda uses the theatre for development form to raise awareness about material conditions of the South African poor. Mda also extends Black Consciousness in a noticeable way by adopting a more class-conscious attitude to race politics. For Mda, race and class are synonymous, in that race determined the oppressed situation of South African blacks. By extending Black Consciousness through a materialist critique, Mda's plays deal with the regional effects of labour migration, the rural-urban dichotomy, and the position of women in society. Mda is also able to deal with the post-apartheid issues of nationalism, corruption and class oppression.

The different approaches to identity construction adopted by both dramatists emanate from their colonial and post-colonial experience. British colonialism made possible the idea of a monolithic African identity. It is also through British colonialism that the differences in the approach to constructing African identities arise. Indirect rule made the tribe the site of modern identity in colonial Africa. Indirect rule granted pseudo-autonomy to Africans. But it was first and foremost a means of control. Apartheid was the logical progression of indirect rule, as Mahmood Mamdani argues.¹ I develop this argument in Chapter One.

In the later part of their careers, certain shifts occur in the two dramatists' approaches to identity formations. For Soyinka, the Nigerian Civil War is responsible for the shift of focus from myth to contemporary social concerns in constructing identities. Soyinka's

¹ Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*, (Oxford: James Currey, 1996), 8.

shift elicits a change of dramatic forms. Soyinka uses absurdism and satire to critique the nation-state. Poor leadership remains a major theme, but it is grounded in a more materialist and contemporary awareness.

Post-apartheid South Africa offers Mda new opportunities as a writer. His attention is now focused on being a novelist. His novels deal with post-apartheid South Africa, through the use of myth and magic realism. Critics are divided on Mda's new literary path, an issue I discuss in Chapter Six.

Limitations of time and access to materials have sculpted this thesis into its present form. Zakes Mda, though renowned in South Africa, is little known in Britain. I met Mda in London last year but he was unwilling to talk about his plays, having embarked on his own transformation into a novelist. I did not have a chance to speak with the peripatetic Soyinka, although there is already a wealth of information about him. A comparative study of two dramatists writing at crucial yet different periods of their nations' history (and both being sceptical about the concept of the nation-state itself) can blur one's sense of direction. My aim is to see what the dramatists have created out of the personal histories of individuals caught up in those periods of false hopes and unrest.

Chapter One offers a brief account of the theoretical framework surrounding identity, followed by an historical overview of colonialism and indirect rule in British Africa. I do this to show the constructed nature of identities and how colonialism informs the notion of an authentic African identity. The colonial experience of Nigeria and Southern Africa

is compared and contrasted. I trace how national, ethnic and individual identities are formed in the rural and urban space, and how civil rule and customary law informed these identities, leading to a structural dichotomy across colonial Africa. I examine the role of education and religion in shaping Africans and their attitudes towards modernity. Chapter One looks at the nature of resistance to colonialism, specifically, to indirect rule. I also examine Soyinka's position on Negritude and Mda's position on Black Consciousness, in relation to their scepticism towards ideology.

Chapter Two covers the dramatic theories of Wole Soyinka and Zakes Mda, to see how they work through their formations of identities. The early Soyinka adopts an essentialist approach to African identity, basing it on the particularity of his Yoruba mythic traditions and a fluid notion of history. Soyinka posits a universal humanism in an African cultural specificity. By replacing race with ethnicity, Soyinka opts for a heterogeneous composition of identity formation. Soyinka identifies with Yoruba creative traditions, with writers like D.O. Fagunwa and Amos Tutuola whose syncretism suggests an unproblematic hybridity. Finally I study *The Strong Breed* (1963), to locate Soyinka's indigenous theory of the tragic and heroic spirit of Ogun, Yoruba god of iron, as the archetype of Yoruba identity.

I scrutinise Zakes Mda to show how his work differs from his Black Consciousness or township theatre contemporaries. I first undertake a brief study of segregation and apartheid so as to clarify the response of writers of the 1970s, Mda's most productive period. The effects of apartheid on the family in Southern Africa are major concerns for Mda. Migration and rural-urban displacements destabilised the family life of black South

Africans. I compare protest theatre with resistance theatre, and show how Mda's consideration of the rural areas, women, the role of religion in society and the post-colonial nation-state make him a unique writer of this period. I end by looking at *We shall Sing for the Fatherland* (1990), in order to show how Mda proves the paucity of race-based ideology in a post-independence nation-state.

Chapter Three focuses on the themes and influences that Soyinka employs in constructing an authentic African identity. The family and moral identity are two points on which his discourse of mythic origins is based. Soyinka finds tragedy the most viable genre in which to posit his mythic ideal of African identity. 'The Fourth Stage', Soyinka's major critical work, is scrutinised for cultural appropriations through Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). The experience of the Nigerian Civil War led Soyinka to seek non-mythic concepts of identity. The experience also led to finding forms suitable for his new aesthetic vision, in light of social changes in post-war Nigeria. These forms were absurdism and satire. I end the chapter with a reading of two plays that deal with the military involvement in national affairs: *Madmen and Specialists* (1971) and *A Play of Giants* (1984). The two plays point to Soyinka's realisation of the inadequacy of his mythic identities in post-war Nigeria.

Chapter Four looks at how apartheid and Black Consciousness operate as ideologies of essentialism. Black Consciousness remains Mda's major influence. I scrutinise the influence of African American Black Power on Black Consciousness, and Mda's perception of Christianity as a site of false consciousness. I look at Mda's expansion of

Black Consciousness' critique to include South Africa's hegemony over Southern Africa. Mda's view of Southern Africa and the post-colonial situation is informed by his experience of exile in Lesotho, a nation whose history is intertwined with that of South Africa's. The influence of Athol Fugard on Mda's dramaturgy is important: Mda's aesthetic influences are garnered from Fugard's township plays. I examine Mda's criticism of Fugard's 'protest theatre', and his argument that they do not go far enough in seeking ways out of the oppressive condition of the apartheid state. I end the chapter with a study of *And the Girls in their Sunday Dresses* (1993) and *The Hill* (1990). Both plays deal with the effects of South Africa's regional hegemony on individuals in relation to race, class, religion, and labour migration.

In Chapter Five, I address the representation of women from dramatic, literary and historical perspectives. I examine the status of women in colonial and post-independence Africa, and the way they are portrayed in drama by Soyinka and Mda. Soyinka's depiction of women echoes the conservative view prevalent in Yoruba popular theatre. Women are either submissive virgins or sexual deviants. Iyaloja, the powerful market leader, is unique in Soyinka's oeuvre in that she is of political rank. But her position in regard to that of the virgin bride betrays her allegiance to the male dominant power of Oyo. Soyinka better represents women outside myth. I look at how Soyinka represents women in three plays: *The Lion and the Jewel* (1963), *Kongi's Harvest* (1967) and *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975).

Mda's centralising of women in his dramas is unique. Township theatre concentrated on urban, male issues. Mda's works depict women effecting change in their oppressed conditions. He shows that true liberation is not possible if women are not involved. By giving a platform to women, Mda opens up the home and the rural areas to scrutiny. This is shown in the plays I critique: *Dark Voices Ring* (1990) and *Joys of War* (1993). I return to *The Hill* to show how Mda portrays the prostitute.

In Chapter Six, I address politics in the works of Soyinka and Mda, to show how their formations of identities, shifting and temporary, are located in the social historical field. Soyinka relegates his mythic representations to a less important position, as he focuses on the nature of military rule in Nigeria. I look at his political writings that criticise military rule. Soyinka elaborates on collaboration between the intellectuals and the underclass. Unlocking identities in Soyinka's work furthers the idea of the city as a space of transformation and social change. Soyinka's scepticism of ideology remains, as the change is not of outright revolution.

I examine Mda's position in post-apartheid South Africa. I analyse Mda's post-apartheid writings on the new South Africa, and the role of drama in reconciliation and new identity formations. Mda remains an anti-nationalist, but just as South Africa created the themes for his apartheid era plays, so he cannot ignore post-apartheid South Africa's urgent need for change in its transition to majority rule. The necessary reforms to facilitate peaceful change must entail conscience-raising of a suitable kind. Mda shows the dangers of failure in this enterprise in *The Road* (1990), which I analyse. I return to theatre for development, to show how new identities can be formed in the rural areas

through the ownership of the media resources. Mda is concerned with how media resources can act as a tool for development.

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Chapter One

Constructions of Identity in Colonial and Post-colonial Contexts

In this chapter, I lay the theoretical and historical foundation to this thesis, which looks at identity construction in African drama. Through a comparative study of the works of Wole Soyinka and Zakes Mda, the thesis focuses on how notions of African identities function in drama. In doing so, I look some of the influences that complicate the idea of a single African identity.

I identify three phases of identity formations. 1. The precolonial heterogeneous societies where identities were fluid. 2. The period of formal colonialism where indirect rule policy fabricated tribes, exacerbating differences among African ethnic groups. 3. The nationalist/anti-colonialist phase, where Africans were identified by race as a homogenous group, in opposition to the colonialists. The nature of British indirect rule accounts for differences in identity formations among British African dramatists in their respective countries. Administrative expediency necessitated a change of perception of Africans as ethnicities instead of as one racial group. Colonialism created the conditions for thinking of a single African identity, by first representing identity racially and later, as tribes. The tribe became the locus of modern identity. It is within these ethnic formations that African dramatists construct identities of their characters as ‘African’, negotiating the attending distinctions of race, class, gender, education, ethnicity, nationality and Pan-Africanism.¹

This chapter attends to several key issues. I will look at identity itself and locate it socially in colonial and post-colonial contexts. Post-colonial here refers to the period after colonialism, since what constitutes post-colonial varies in the effects the colonial encounter caused in modern independent African states. I will look at the major effects of British colonialism through hegemonic practices such as religion and education, which promoted ethnicism, thus serving the purposes of indirect rule. Then I will inspect the nature of indirect rule in Nigeria and South Africa. Afterwards I will look at ideologies of resistance, namely Negritude and Black Consciousness. These two ideologies are particularly important for they are the ones respectively that Soyinka and Mda engage with. It is through this engagement with resistance ideology that the two dramatists make their unique interpretations of African identities based on the individual.

The African dramatist cannot construct any kind of identity in the absence of historical and social reality. It is imperative to note how indirect rule was constructive to African self-perception, for it shows African dramatists negotiating identities post-independence according to the colonial developments of their geographical locations. Indirect rule's pervading influence in these formations can be shown through a historical materialist approach, mapping generally the effects of colonial policy on British Africans in West and Southern Africa. This mapping defines African agency through what D.A. Masolo calls 'valuational ambivalence' (Masolo, 1997: 284). Valuational ambivalence describes the conditional nature of individual identities in relation to a wider social group, be it the family or the state. Chinua Achebe, in *Things Fall Apart* illustrates this condition in relation to the coming of the British to Umuofia:

¹ See Lewis Nkosi, *Home and Exile*, ([1965] London: Longman, 1983), 30-1.

There were many men and women in Umuofia who did not feel as strongly as Okonkwo about the new dispensation. The white man had indeed brought a lunatic religion, but he had also built a trading store and for the first time palm-oil and kernel became things of great price, and much money flowed into Umuofia. (Achebe, 2001: 130)

The nature of homogenous society falling apart in Umuofia is not only through colonial intrusion but also by the individual Umuofian seeking new opportunities within the global economy this intrusion has brought about. The economic shifts render in general a valuational ambivalence because society is torn from within the community through individual reactions to colonialism. This example of agency forces the argument against a monolithic representation of African identities and leads me to pluralise identity when referring to African subject formations. I do this bearing in mind that colonial mapping first totalised the 'Other', based on race and colour. For purposes of control the need arose to ascribe fundamental differences to African groups, which indirect rule facilitated. Pan-Africanism and Negritude also appropriated a totalising scheme to unite alienated Africans against colonialism. The idealism of their rejecting colonial historiography tended to ignore the precolonial heterogeneity of African ethnicities. Postcolonial² theories shaped by deconstructive postmodernism reiterate fragmentation of identities, rejecting the discourse of colonial historiography and of totalising resistance theories. We must remember that ideologies such as Black Consciousness and Negritude in anti-colonial discourse and action acted upon their adherents in meaningful ways, too. These ideologies responded to the political, psychological³ and social effects of colonialism, effectively rewriting the history of the colonised in a project aimed at a

² I use the term without the hyphen to refer to the theories generated that describe the conditions of post-colonial states.

suitable recovery of the past. Against this project, we must be careful, as Elizabeth Isichei is, of revising the history of African agency as one that ‘insists that the African of the past was making rational choices which benefited the society he lived in. It is very akin in spirit to the revisionism which emphasises the triumphs of the colonial period – the rich African merchant, the prosperous innovating peasant’ (Isichei, 1983: 108).

The African dramatists’ representations of identities continue to engage with the colonial past.⁴ This is because, as Ngugi wa Thiongo states, imperialism, in its colonial and neocolonial stages has affected everything in Africa, including its literature.⁵ By nature of their work and position in society *vis-a-vis* the national elite, African dramatists address the concerns of the post-independent nation because exploitation does not disappear with the departure of colonialism. The nation enters a neocolonial relationship in which the national bourgeoisie act as middlemen for the Western powers. African dramatists in turn face the immediate situation of their respective nations while at the same time contemplate a general historical path for the continent and for the black race. This is because they face similar economic and social conditions, manifestations of a shared post-colonial experience.

With neocolonial relations located between nations, the African dramatist enters another phase in creating a sense of order. Tejumola Olaniyan cites three interactive discursive formations that contribute to the dramatic practice of contemporary black theatre: the

³ Franz Fanon wrote of these effects in *Black Skins, White Masks*, (London: Pluto, 1991).

⁴ Ngugi wa Thiongo sees the African novelist as ‘haunted by a sense of the past’. See Ngugi wa Thiongo, *Homecoming*, (London: Heinemann, 1977), 39.

⁵ Ngugi wa Thiongo, ‘The Role of the Scholar in the development of African Literatures,’ in Bernth Lindfors, ed., *Research Priorities in African Literatures*, (Germany: Zell, 1984), 7-19: 8.

colonialist Eurocentric, the anti-colonial Afrocentric, 'and an *emerging post-Afrocentric*' (Olaniyan, 1995: 11). The post-Afrocentric interrogates Afrocentrism, with the aim of freeing African identity from the binary opposition of Europe and its other. The post-Afrocentric stage arrives after colonialism and involves a discourse of authenticity.⁶ In this African dramatists contend with the claims to identity of colonialist, nationalist and Africanist representations. Soyinka and Mda contribute to this discourse in their own ways, by positing a humanistic interpretation of African identities that is, in Olaniyan's term, post-Afrocentric. To trace the post-Afrocentrism of Soyinka and Mda, I will first look at some definitions of identity.

Identities

As we shall see later, Soyinka and Mda privilege the collective as the site of identity formations. At the same time they construct African identities on individual exceptionalism. Soyinka's ideal African identity is constructed by myth while Mda's everyman/woman is constructed by material experience. Both dramatists seek the place of the individual within society. For Soyinka and Mda, individual identities arise out of social interaction. I look at a sociological definition of the self with regard to social interaction, through George Herbert Mead, and a linguistic and psychoanalytic definition through Jacques Lacan. To continue this relationship between individual and society in identity formations, I look at Freud's theory of the individual and civilisation.

⁶ Olaniyan argues that Afrocentrism remains within a Eurocentric discourse. See Tejumola Olaniyan, *Scars of Conquest/Masks of Resistance: The Invention of Cultural Identities in African, African-American and Caribbean Drama*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995). For supporting views of Afrocentrism, see Molefi A. Ashante. *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change*, (U.S.A.: Amulefi, 1980), Molefi, A. Ashante, *The Afrocentric Idea*, (U.S.A.: Temple UP,

Mead defines the self as ‘something that has a development; it is not initially there at birth but arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is, develops in the given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a whole to the other individuals within that process’ (Mead, 1967: 135). He goes on to state that the self is essentially a social structure that arises out of social experience. Individuals are brought into a type of consciousness through signs and symbols learnt from participation in their community. We can relate this definition to the effects of indirect rule as a disruption of social activity within a community.⁷ We must view these disruptions through not only imposition by colonialism on its subjects, as Achebe’s example shows. The individual responds to new patterns, that shape other relations on individual and group levels, such as within the rural and urban locations and with regards to work and the authority of Native Administration chiefs. An amount of agency is exercised within this contact. Homi Bhabha refers to this pattern of identity formations based on coloniser/colonised relationships of interdependence as hybridity.⁸ The space of hybridity for Bhabha, however remains one of uncertainty, especially once the coloniser exits from power. The culture that is produced by this interaction cannot be simply appropriated. There can be no return to the former way of life which resistance rhetoric re-invented to create a binary opposition to colonialism.

Jacque Lacan’s theory of the consciousness being structured like a language offers a psychoanalytic, linguistic interpretation of how the subject comes into self-awareness

1987), Cheikh Anta Diop, *The Cultural Unity of Black Africa*, (U.S.A.: Third World P, 1978). For a critique of Afrocentrism, see Stephen Howe, *Afrocentrism: Mythical Pasts and Imagined Homes*, (U.K.: Verso, 1998).

⁷ See Aime Cesaire, ‘From Discourse on Colonialism’ in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), 172-180.

⁸ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1994), 114.

distinct from others when it develops its facility for speech. For the individual to enter subject relations it must first reach a development stage within a linguistic community. The subject defines itself in relation to others through speech. Lacan states that the speech stage is when the subject enters imaginary and symbolic relations with its environment.⁹ Lacan's theory is useful in looking at the relationships between the individual and the community, through the idiolect and the sociolect. The idiolect describes the particular speech patterns of the individual as distinct from the sociolect which describes the speech patterns of the community. The dramatist's constructions of African identities as an authentic identity start from either the family and/or within a homogeneous community. For Soyinka, it is within a culturally defined community. For Mda it is within the experience of oppression. Within these social formations is a considerable homogeneity of language, culture and history, in which the individual is acculturated into society. Indirect rule facilitated cultures being essentialised. Ethnic groups were deemed to possess certain immutable characteristics, which affected inter- and intra-ethnic relations, as well as inter-racial relations. The urban-rural dichotomy affected relations within the family and the community. Religion and education contributed to the ethnic representations Africans ascribed to themselves. Dramatic representations of African identities must consider these factors. Contesting imaginary and symbolic relations entail self-definition through the dramatists' perception of African identities.

To move subject formations into a larger social complex, Freud's writing on the individual's relationship with civilisation proves fruitful. Freud extends the concept of the

⁹ Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*, A. Sheridan, trans., (London: Tavistock, 1977).

super-ego to the community. A community's super-ego is formed by great individuals of the past, 'men of overwhelming force of mind or men in whom one of the human impulses has found its strongest and purest, and therefore often its most one-sided expression' (Freud, 1969: 78). In a word: ancestors.¹⁰ In its modern, living manifestation in Yoruba society, these strong individuals are referred to as 'Big Man'.¹¹ This relates to the discussion on Soyinka and his constructions of the ideal Yoruba identity through an ideal heroism. For Freud the main basis for this community is to counter individuals' aggression towards each other and by so doing curbs individual freedoms, which produces the neurotic subject. These tensions, the curbing of excess and aggression, centre on the individual. It is through the individual that African dramatists show the effects of colonial epistemic violence on their communities and relate it to the colonial experience in Africa as a whole.

These theories situate individual identity in a social network, where recognition comes from one's position in a community. Allowing for Lacan's signs and signifiers slipping in meaning from each other, and for desire, which can be expressed only indirectly, stability – culture – is required for the subject to enter into social relationships. The subject expresses its identity through desire. Desire expresses the subject's individuality, which can be at odds with social norms. Colonialism's social and economic reconfigurations changed existing social relationships. It changed the way in which the individual could

¹⁰ Ernest Renan placed great importance on ancestor worship as the foundation for nationhood. See Ernest Renan, 'What is a Nation?' Martin Thom, trans., in Homi Bhabha, *Nation and Narration*, (London: Routledge, 1995), 8-22: 19. In using Renan's example of the foundation of a nation, I am aware of his attitude to 'inferior or degenerate races'. See Cesaire, 175.

¹¹ See Karin Barber, 'How Man Makes God in West Africa: Yoruba Attitudes Towards the *Orisa*,' in Roy Grinker and Christopher Steiner, *Perspectives on Africa: A Reader in Culture, History and Representation*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 392-411.

express desire and relate to the environments new and old. Trying to balance the expression of these desires creates, in Bhabha's formulation, areas of ambiguity, where there is a constant negotiation between desire and the spheres of modern and traditional. A manifestation is the redirecting of the historical progress of communities. African dramatists cannot escape identity recuperation. They must confront colonialism, for Africans continue to feel its effects in its neocolonial phase. Colonialism, through indirect rule created a tension, a crisis of confidence in identities, by redirecting societies' development along Europe's own historical progression. This redirection created contradictions in what constituted the individual as regards race superiority and ethnicity. It changed concepts of progress and civilisation for African societies. Indirect rule was not a benign system that provided African societies with autonomy but one that determined the role of Africans in Western modernity.

Colonialism was not a monolithic enterprise. Its unwieldy nature used various strategies of identification to control different peoples. The perception of Africans by Europeans came through literature, travel writing and fiction. The slave trade contributed to the colonial view of Africans as a monolithic identity of inherent inferiority.¹² The expanding global economic network brought about the need to secure interests and build markets abroad. Images of colonial subjects altered whenever there was a threat against colonial interests, showing the instability of Western concepts of race, and the primacy of domination and protection of economic interests.¹³ Indirect rule sought to stabilise identities in order to create divisions of labour and consolidate hegemonic control. When

¹² See Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Books, 1967), 88.

necessary, hegemonic controls were backed up with force. The British imperative was for Africans to view their identities as inferior. This was the only way Africans would leave their own historical path and accept the Western narrative of progress in which they were of secondary status.

Bearing this in mind, can we view colonialism as ‘just another episode’¹⁴ and therefore integral and unproblematic to an African identity? Is the notion of African uniqueness sustainable only as myth, thus validating the opinion that ‘Africa is a geographical, not a cultural term’? (Janz, 1969: 19) Does Africa extend beyond ‘the idea of identity between culture and race’ (Janz, 1969: 19) to affirm a cultural unity among its diverse ethnicities, as proclaimed by Pan-Africanist ideologies? Can we view Africa as: ‘a metaphysical landscape’ because ‘it is in fact a view of the world and of the whole cosmos perceived from a particular position’ (Achebe, 1975: 50)? Achebe views African cultures as fundamentally similar, an issue Soyinka and Mda address. But we cannot seek these similarities solely on an assumed metaphysical unity. The dramatist contributes to this discourse by constructing at the level of trope and metaphor the experience of individuals and groups working through these myths and ideologies and by so doing seeks ‘the victory of mental order over the chaos of the world’ (Calvino, 2000: 24). More important, the dramatist emphasises possibilities, of transition and transformation of identities in their changing social contexts and thereby challenges held assumptions.

¹³ For how identities fluctuated according to different motives of the coloniser, see Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, (London: Routledge, 1998), 104-183.

¹⁴ J.F.A. Ajayi, quoted in Immanuel Wallerstein, ‘The Colonial Era in Africa: Changes in the Social Structure,’ in L.H. Gann and Peter Duignan, *Colonialism in Africa, 1870-1960: The History and Politics of Colonialism*, Vol. 2, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1970), 399-421: 399.

Identities in Africa were directly affected by European incursion. Dichotomies were created socially and geographically, between the urban and the rural, the traditional and the modern, the centre and the periphery. They all are effects of European capitalism on Africa's landscape. Commercially productive areas or settler colonies were given preferential treatment. Ethnic groups kindly disposed to native administration were favoured over groups that resisted it. These factors contributed to the political and social identities that would emerge out of colonial rule and into the nation-states of modern Africa.

I have said colonial conquest was an unwieldy affair, yet we find it historically inscribed in monolithic terms as a total conquest of one racial group over another. An example, although unwittingly, is Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), where the Orient seems a passive actor in the imagination of Western orientalists and imperialists. Afrocentrism also represents colonialism as a monolithic enterprise. This enables the continuing construction of identities as essentially racially different.¹⁵ Therefore it is not only the usual suspect of racist historiography that sees colonialism as a normal historical process of the superior race subjugating an inferior one. This representation is present in several concrete manifestations today from indirect financial control through the World Bank to development aid. To view colonialism simply as 'just another episode' fails to understand the political and economic dimensions that perpetuates this domination in the 21st century. It echoes a similar assumption of 'post-colonial' to describe an historical period as if this domination is over and as if the effects were similarly felt across the continent.

The effects on African identities can be seen through an historical overview of British colonialism in Africa.

British Colonialism in Africa

Colonialism is 'the specific form of cultural exploitation that developed with Europe over the last 400 years' (Ashcroft et al: 1998: 45). Ania Loomba observes that the Oxford English Dictionary definition avoids mentioning the original inhabitants living in an area prior to colony settlement (Loomba, 1998: 1). The anodyne dictionary definition omits reference to the nature and consequences of colonialism in its more recent historical phase. This Eurocentric definition describes colonialism as 'just another episode' in world history, a natural order of events of globalisation and modernity.

Colonialism was not a monolithic process of subjugation and appropriation. From 1756 to 1783, British politicians and officials 'had no coherent philosophy of empire. Instead they were dealing with practical and technical questions located in narrow contexts and they often had neither the time nor the inclination to attempt to make connections with the broader scheme of things' (Bowen, 1998: 10). H.V. Bowen's remarks set up indirect rule as a necessary apparatus for British colonialism in Africa and implicate this attitude of colonial administration as a catalyst for the creation of new African identities.

Reaction to colonialism was on several fronts, through these 'narrow contexts'.

Recognition of the fragmented nature of and resistance to colonialism informs the work

¹⁵ See Elliot Skinner, 'The African Presence: In Defense of Africanity,' in William G. Martin and Michael O. West, *Out of One, Many Africas: Reconstructing the Study and Meaning of Africa*, (Urbana and Chicago: U of Illinois P,

of postcolonial theorists such as Edward Said,¹⁶ Homi Bhabha¹⁷ and Gayatri Spivak.¹⁸

Said's *Orientalism*, for instance, recognises the power of representation and its field of constructions in Western literature, as they apply to a monolithic rendering of the colonised culture, even when considering its problems that I have earlier pointed out.

Postcolonial theories challenge colonial historiography by recognising that resistance to colonialism was fought on multiple fronts that were not all ideological.¹⁹ Postcolonial theories challenge the linear, monolithic claims of both colonial and nationalist resistance histories. By making visible marginal identities, by providing space for self-articulation, postcolonial theories return to subject peoples their obvious humanity, which they were forced to contest in the face of climacteric change. Yet in its interrogation of Eurocentric historiography, postcolonial theories remain, like Afrocentrism, locked within the discursive practices of the West. Hence we find critics querying its efficacy and that 'post-colonial studies needs always to remember that its referent in the real world is a form of political, economic, and discursive oppression whose name, first and last, is *colonialism*' (Slemon, 1997: 52).²⁰

Certain failures changed the way in which Empire was perceived and how it operated.

Failure to penetrate the Chinese and Islamic worlds to their satisfaction forced many

1999)

¹⁶ Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, (London: Penguin, 1991).

¹⁷ Bhabha, 1994.

¹⁸ Gayatri Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, (New York: Methuen, 1987).

¹⁹ Frederick Cooper, 'Conflict and Connection: Rethinking Colonial African History,' in *The American History Review*, 99.5 (1994), 1516-45: 1520.

²⁰ See also Niyi Osundare, 'African Literature and the Crisis of Post-Structuralist Theorising,' in Kofi Anyidoho, Abena Busia, Anne Adams, eds., *Beyond Survival: African Literature and the Search for New Life*, 5. (U.S.A.: African World Press, 1999), 57-74. Benita Parry, 'Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse,' in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, eds., *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, (London: Routledge, 1997), 36-44.

Victorians to accept that non-Europeans did not share their view of modernity.²¹ The most successful areas of capitalist expansion were in settler regions.²² British colonial experiences in India added weight to these observations. The new strategy was to concentrate on administrative control rather than influence social attitudes. The scepticism of Africans towards European-style modernity implied to the coloniser an inherent inferiority. The identification of race with culture added weight to the idea of indirect rule in controlling different groups through divide and rule strategies.

The confidence in the transforming power of Western modernisation shaken, colonialism in British West Africa became a law and order regime, with sites of power intensified through indirect rule. The image of the native as an eternal savage incapable of rising above his barbarous state was impressed on the minds of the coloniser through literature and popular entertainment.²³ This provided the ideology for dominating non-Europeans and around which a scientific and literary discourse of race developed. Today we see its intellectual and ideological inheritance in works such as Charles Murray's *The Bell Curve* (1994). The historiography collated by the Departments of State and the Indian Service, coupled with the arrogant mindset of the Late Victorians in Whitehall drew up policies that were a throwback to the days of mid-Victorian imperiousness. Class distinction featured prominently in the way colonial policy was mediated in Africa. So where previously it was assumed that there was no need for the expansion of territorial claims

²¹ Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians: The Official Mind of Imperialism* (London: Macmillan, 1981), 10.

²² Robinson, 8

²³ For the roots of this Western racial stereotyping, see Gustav Jahoda, *Images of Savages: Ancient Roots of Modern Prejudice in Western Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1999). For the ways in which popular culture spread imperialism as the dominant national ideology in Britain see, John Mackenzie, *Propaganda and Empire*, (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984). John Mackenzie, ed., *Imperialism and Popular Culture*, (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1986). Jeffrey Richards,

and a policy of consolidation was in operation, Africa became the victim of accelerated incursion and partition.²⁴

Commerce remained the major determining factor. Coercion became a greater feature in opening up markets.²⁵ In order to facilitate economic expansion, it was necessary to put Africans in their place through British notions of class, which became synonymous with race. Expansion of empire needed a practical form of administration. For the British Empire this would take the shape of indirect rule.

Indirect Rule

I have said that African dramatists cannot escape colonialism when creating African identities. Indirect rule was the administrative structure through which majority of Africans encountered colonialism. It was a cost-effective means of controlling a vast empire. It relied on a notion of cultural essentialism through which subject peoples came to identify themselves as sub-nationalities. Indirect rule became the way in which Africans related with colonialism and with each other.²⁶ Ethnic chauvinism constitutes one of the greatest tensions in modern African states today. The inability to resolve this problem is due to the fact that colonialism intensified and institutionalised these invented differences through the material effects of indirect rule: division of labour, the uneven development of the rural/urban dichotomy and the traditional/modern dichotomy.

Imperialism and Juvenile Literature, (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1989). Joseph Bristow, *Empire Boys: Adventures in a Man's World*, (London: HarperCollins, 1991).

²⁴ For a history on the partition of Africa see, Thomas Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa, 1876-1912*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1991). Robert Collins, *The Partition of Africa, Illusion or Necessity?* (U.S.A.: John Wiley and Sons, 1969).

²⁵ Michael Crowder, *The Story of Nigeria*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1978), 189-190.

²⁶ Terence Ranger, 'The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa,' in Eric Hobsbawm and T.O. Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition*, (U.S.A./U.K.: Cambridge UP, 1997), 211-261: 212.

Though indirect rule is considered a British model of native administration, the French policy of association and assimilation operated similarly.²⁷ The policy of assimilation²⁸ was different in that it gave select Africans an opportunity to become French but as Eldred Jones states 'The differences between the systems have been over-exaggerated. Neither system was designed to produce an African who would be proud of being an African' (Jones, 1971: 113). Considering the fact that most Africans would recognise the reality of colonial power through their chiefs and headmen, it is safe to assert that indirect rule 'was a transition ultimately made by every colonial power' (Mamdani: 1996: 90).

Indirect rule remains the space in which Africans related with the colonialists and themselves. Frederick Lugard and Theophilus Shepstone who introduced the system saw Africans not as individuals but as groups that shared similar characteristics. Lugard imposed indirect rule on the republican Igbos of Southern Nigeria.²⁹ It is not true to say, as Michael Crowder does, that:

Neither the economic nor administrative policy of the government set out deliberately to upset the traditional social structure. Indeed the core of the philosophy of indirect rule as it came to be practised in Nigeria from 1906 onwards was the ensurance of minimum interference with 'native society'. It attempted only to create favourable conditions for trade and to ensure what it considered the basic essentials of human behaviour. (Crowder, 1978: 192)

²⁷ Martin Kilson, 'The Emergent Elites of Black Africa, 1900-1960,' in Gann and Duignan, 351-398: 374.

²⁸ For a study of the French colonial policies of association and assimilation see, Aguibou Y. Yansane, *Decolonization in West African States with French Colonial Legacy, Comparison and Contrast: Development in Guinea, The Ivory Coast and Senegal, (1945-1980)*, (U.S.A.: Schenken, 1984).

²⁹ Helen Lackner sees the imposition of warrant chiefs in Southern Nigeria as resulting in the Biafran nationalism of the 1960s. See Helen Lackner, 'Social Anthropology and Indirect Rule: The Colonial Administration and Anthropology in Eastern Nigeria, 1920-1940,' in Talal Asad, ed., *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*, (London: Ithaca, 1975), 123-151: 124.

Crowder fails to recognise that indirect rule was interventionist and regulatory. The very nature of native administration not only changed but also replaced the cultural support upon which traditional authority was based.³⁰ Indirect rule, which Mahmood Mamdani describes as ‘decentralised despotism’ (Mamdani, 1996: 8) was the face of colonialism for the majority of Africans. The economic imperative that drove expansion necessitated controls that crippled African self-sufficiency and ensured cheap labour, especially in Southern Africa when gold and diamonds were discovered in commercial quantities.³¹ This was the prime motive for native administration.

Indirect rule did not allow African ethnic groups to develop autonomously but determined the ways in which they were exploited in the capitalist system. In Southern Africa the displacement of ethnic groups from their land is an example of the colonial government’s privileging of white farmers. African resistance to land encroachment was located in the tribes. As groups with longstanding relations with their environment, they proved difficult to dislodge to free up land for European migrants. The early Boer republics viewed tribal affiliation as a danger to their expansionist hegemony and as something to be disabled, ‘for they defined the parameters of an autonomous way of life. This autonomy was multi-faceted: the tribal economy was a source of livelihood, tribal ideology a source of identity and common purpose, and tribal institutions a potential locus of peasant resistance’ (Mamdani, 1996: 91). The British on the other hand saw tribal affiliation as the basis for indirect rule. Later the Boers realised the numerical and

³⁰ R.S. Rattray, *Ashanti Law and Constitution* (London: 1929), ix.

³¹ Use of cheap labour was not solely the preserve of colonialism in Southern Africa. Forced Labour was used in West Africa also. See Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of Nigeria*, (London: Longman, 1983), 389.

political advantages of categorising the 'native' into ethnic groups.³² Segregation laws and laws such as the Natives Land Act (1913) show that indirect rule was not benign for Africans were not permitted to engage with Europeans as equals. They were not included in civil society. The consequences of European land grabbing forced Africans into migrant labour. Migration is a theme which dramatists from Herbert Dhlomo to Athol Fugard and Mda have addressed with particular insight to its dehumanising effects on individuals, communities and their identities.

Colonialism's economic imperative is an effect shared by the whole continent. Administrative expediency facilitated commercial interests so as to make the colonies viable. French expansion was determined by chauvinistic reactions to the politics in Europe.³³ Unilateral actions by the military and merchants became de facto French imperial policy.³⁴ What varies is the way in which colonial administrative policies facilitated European commercial domination.

The power of native administration resided in the chiefs who were answerable to the colonial administration. Chiefly power rested on three institutions: 'Native Courts, Native Authority and a Native Treasury' (Mamdani, 1996: 53). A fourth institution was rule making. The chief became the locus of power, vested with an authority he (the chiefs were almost always male) had never possessed in pre-colonial society.³⁵ The system was

³² Mamdani, 94. William Beinart defines modern chieftancy as a creation of the South African state. See William Beinart. 'Chieftancy and the Concept of Articulation: South Africa circa 1900-50,' in Beinart and Saul Dubow, *Segregation and Apartheid in Twentieth Century South Africa*, (London: Routledge, 1995), 176-188.

³³ John D. Hargreaves, *West Africa Partitioned. Vol. 1: The Loaded Pause*, (London: Macmillan, 1974), 30-33.

³⁴ Hargreaves, 31-2. French colonial expansion can be seen in the view of Robinson who says 'it was the extension of territorial claims which in time required commercial expansion' (Robinson, 1974: 472).

³⁵ Kilson, 377-8.

open to abuse, which went unpunished, for to discipline a chief was to weaken his authority and, by extension, colonial authority.³⁶ In areas where they did not exist chiefs were created as traditional institutions. Mamdani explains:

The important point was to ensure that the parameters of this state authority corresponded with that of the native community, the tribe, and then to rule through it. Between culture and territory, the former must define the parameters of decentralized rule: the boundaries of culture would mark the parameters of territorial administration. This is why to install a state apparatus among communities whose lives had never before been shaped by one was literally to invent tribes! (Mamdani, 1996: 79)

The regulatory nature of indirect rule determined the identities of Africans by inventing groups and traditions. In early 20th century colonial Malawi tribal chiefs received tuition on how to rule according to ‘tradition’ (Power, 1992: 333). In the traditionally republican Eastern Nigeria, the colonial administration created warrant chiefs who acted as their agents of indirect rule. Northern Nigeria was well adapted to indirect rule due to the hierarchical nature of its pre-colonial centralised state. Lugard saw this as the administrative model for the whole of Nigeria after amalgamation in 1914 without considering the differences of pre-colonial administrative structures.³⁷ The pre-colonial structures were part and parcel of group identities, and the inability to restructure the colonial model of administration undermined the stability of Nigeria after independence. The disregard for traditional institutions, the invention of tribes and rulers where none existed disproves the theory that indirect rule ‘did not set out deliberately to upset the traditional social structure’. As Amilcar Cabral states, ‘it is not possible to harmonize the

³⁶ Isichei, 380.

³⁷ For Lugard’s favouring of Northern Nigeria, see Michael Crowder, ‘The White Chiefs of Tropical Africa,’ in Gann and Duignan, 320-50: 342-3.

economic and political domination of a people... with the preservation of their cultural personality' (Cabral, 1974: 40).

Indirect rule led to the invention of traditions that would be attached to particular groups. This distorted picture was how these groups and individuals saw themselves and how they engaged with colonial rule.³⁸ In Nigeria, the British invented fundamental differences and interests among the ethnic groups. And so:

By seeing subject peoples primarily in ethnic terms (rather than, for instance, in economic terms) colonial rulers did much to ensure that they viewed themselves in the same way. They assumed that ethnic groups had corporate interests and characteristics, until it finally became true that they did. (Isichei, 1983: 392)³⁹

Ideally, the colonial powers regarded African culture as static, hierarchical, communal and patriarchal.⁴⁰ This is despite the fact that several of the traditions through which they perceived these features were of their own creation, ideologically tinted with their own notions of class hierarchy. Or, as in Lugard's case they were specific to a particular ethnic group. Still, indirect rule became a potent means of identities for Africans.⁴¹ It became the site on which relationships between Africans and their colonisers were based. Colonial authority did not perceive Africans as individuals but as indistinct members of their groups.⁴² These notions of the communality of African societies drove Native

³⁸ Ranger, 212.

³⁹ See also: Lord Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in Tropical Black Africa*, (1922; London: Frank Cass, 1965). A.H.M. Kirk-Greene: *The Principles of Native Administration in Nigeria: Selected Documents*, (London: Oxford UP, 1965). Obaro Ikime: *The Fall of Nigeria: The British Conquest*, (U.K.: Heinemann, 1977).

⁴⁰ Ranger, 247.

⁴¹ This potency refers to what I mentioned earlier about the problems of ethnic allegiance in the modern nation-state. The sub-nationalities with their competing interests have created their imagined unity through the material disappointment with the nation-state, yet they articulate their claims in the very terms of nation-ness. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, (London: Verso, 1991), 3; 5-6.

⁴² Memmi, 88.

Administration. The effect was to create identities to which Africans were forced to adopt.⁴³ The collective approach towards relating with Africans was to thwart class formations, ensure greater control of the population and prevent the growth of a petit-bourgeoisie that would resist chiefly rule in other parts of Africa, as was the case in West Africa.

Soyinka works through the unstructured nation-state in his plays, where the traditional power base is accepted as a counter to colonialism. But this power base was deeply implicated in the class relations formed out of colonialism through colonial education and invented traditions. Soyinka's idealistic reading of culture deliberately ignores the influence of indirect rule on traditional structures by locating mythic interpretations of identity in the individual rather than in the community. This, as I earlier stated, creates interesting perspectives in his identity constructions. In *The Lion and the Jewel*, for instance, Baroka the traditionalist holds on tenaciously to power, to his people's detriment. Traditionalists and colonialists were united in their disdain for educated Africans, who rejected their authority. Baroka, in comic vein, seeks to contain the dilettante Lakunle, who as a modern man, emphasises individualism, although it is an alienating individualism. Though the plot revolves around the contest over Sidi and widens into a larger inspection of authenticity, Baroka as a cultural custodian remains embedded within the colonial framework of indirect rule. He bribes the white engineer not to build a railway through his village. The implications are that traditional institutions and class structures enter the neocolonial phase still within the constructions of

⁴³ See, for instance Joey Power, 'Individualism is the Antithesis of Indirect Rule: Cooperative Development in Colonial Malawi,' in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 18.2, (1992), 317-347: 332.

colonialism. But the play as comedy lessens this impact to focus on the struggle over Sidi.

Mda writing about apartheid South Africa cannot emulate Soyinka even when dealing with independent Southern Africa because of the interconnection between race and class. In *The Road*, power is resolutely in white hands, leaving room for compromise diminished. Farmer puts Labourer firmly in his place within the scheme of race politics. He appropriates Labourer's property, signifying the settler appropriation of the country. Farmer robs Labourer of his humanity. Indirect rule in South Africa developed into the homeland policy where blacks were separated by ethnicity. In *The Road* Mda shows that despite these divisions, blacks were seen as the same, including those from neighbouring independent nations. In the post-independence plays Mda's materialist interpretations⁴⁴ interrogate the ethnic element Black Consciousness dramas use to create awareness of these differences and then overcome them. For Mda, the material conditions already provide the basis for black unity.⁴⁵

The Missionaries and Education in Indirect Rule

Abandoned by the colonialists, the civilising mission was continued by the missionaries. As a wing of Western ideology, their interests coincided with that of the colonial administration in making indirect rule viable. Apart from the assault on African religious and cultural practices, the missionaries provided education, which brought Africans into

⁴⁴ For the distinction between idealist and materialist interpretations of culture see, Raymond Williams, *Culture*, (London: Fontana, 1981), 11-2.

⁴⁵ South African playwrights that have used the multi-lingual scheme to characterise the ethnic diversity and politics of race include Athol Fugard, Percy Mtwa and Matsamela Manaka. Nigerian playwright Ola Rotimi used a multi-lingual strategy in his play, *Hopes of the Living Dead* (Ibadan: Spectrum, 1988).

the sphere of Western modernity. This modernity included ethnic identities that sustained indirect rule. The educated class later resisted chiefly rule. It was from the missions that Eurocentric drama synthesised with African traditional forms.

European missionaries extended Christianity and Western culture in which Africans were to fit as subordinate. Like colonialism, Christianity pulled Africans away from their own historic self-determination. Missionary education socialised Africans into seeing their subordinate position as coterminous with the interests of the 'mother' country. For instance, from 1799 to 1953 the missionaries provided education to South Africa's black population,⁴⁶ aiming to 'scatter the seeds of civilisation' and 'extending British interests, British influence and the British Empire' (Hirson, 1981: 53). In poor conditions education provided was the minimum required for manual and semi-skilled labour. Thus in Southern Africa the ultimate design of missionary education was to create:

a docile and efficient labour force which would accept European religious and political authority and social superiority. At most some of its members might aspire to join an indigenous middle class and participate in "that humbler machinery of local affairs which minister to social order". (Hirson, 1981: 53)

The missionaries were influential in converting their African adherents to Western culture.⁴⁷ They spread not only Christianity but also Western ideologies that were at odds with the colonial administration that saw Africans as labour. For example, even though within the missions racial hierarchy existed, the Khoikhoi of Southern Africa saw in them

⁴⁶ Richard Elphick and Rodney Davenport, eds., *Christianity in South Africa: A Political, Social and Cultural History*, (U.K./Cape Town: James Currey/David Philip, 1997).

⁴⁷ See Timothy Keegan, 'Trade Accumulation and Impoverishment: Mercantile Capital and Economic Transformation of Lesotho and the Conquered Territory, 1870-1920,' in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 12.2 (1986), 196-216: 198.

a vehicle for attaining respectability and privilege. But the commercial and agricultural interests saw Africans as stagnant labour pools and their rights were removed. The removal of these privileges was one of the main factors that led to the Kat River Rebellion.⁴⁸

Missionary education divided Africans along class and cultural lines. Historicising and essentialising ethnic particularity was conducive to the ideology of indirect rule. Through the promotion of indigenous languages and customs among ethnic groups, the tribe developed as the site of inflexible traditions.⁴⁹ Mission-educated men shaped the new ethnic ideologies. They gave ideological support especially to the new chiefs, interpreting traditions and inventing ties of mythological and historical legitimacy. Samuel Johnson's *History of the Yorubas*, a source Yoruba writers including Soyinka use as an authority for a pan-Yoruba identity, can be seen in this light.⁵⁰

Africans were also trained in European languages, which brought them further into the sphere of their Western colonisers. Learning of European languages provided the developing indigenous elite with the linguistic tools to interact with other Africans and Africans in the Diaspora and to travel abroad for higher education. This act, in Francophone and Anglophone Africa, created the contact zones responsible for thinking of Africa as a monolithic entity. The new elite realised that they suffered similarly under colonialism, and that they were not accepted as black Europeans. The British colonial government settled captured slaves, known as 'recaptives', to their coastal colonies in

⁴⁸ For a fuller exposition, see Robert Ross, 'Missions, Respectability and Civil Rights: The Cape Colony, 1828-1854,' in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 25.3 (1999), 333-345.

West Africa and they were to figure largely in the shaping of tribal and Pan-African identities and in anti-colonial politics.⁵¹

In 1950s South Africa, the Afrikaner-led National Party government realised that missionary education was creating a black middle class that might challenge their hegemony. In 1953 the Bantu Education Act was instituted, to teach blacks 'Bantu culture'. The Act brought missionary schools, mainly English-taught, under government control. Local languages would replace English and the subjects taught would be manual labour related vocations. The motives for having lessons taught in local languages were to tribalise Africans and to strengthen the power of chiefs. Robert Kavanagh views the situation from a Marxist perspective. Mission education itself instilled separatism through its European ideology of individualism and elitism:

However, if the Bantu Education Act meant the introduction of an educational system designed to inculcate servility, it also made education available to thousands whom the previous system had excluded. In effect, education, albeit of an inferior brand, became available not only to the children of the intermediate classes but to those of the working class and peasants. (Kavanagh, 1985: 33)

Indeed, Bantu education brought previously excluded Africans into the classroom but it also exacerbated the ethnic violence that would later ensue in the hostels and in the townships. 'Industrial education' made Africans suitable only for the work white industry required from them. It was the educated classes in Africa who were at the forefront of anti-colonial resistance, even though they are now the subject of resistance by the

⁴⁹ Leroy Vail, 'Ethnicity in Southern African History,' in Grinker and Steiner, 52-68: 62.

⁵⁰ See Ato Quayson, *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing*, (Oxford: James Currey, 1997): 162.

⁵¹ For the settling of West Indians in Sierra Leone, and their influence and power, see, Nemata Blyden, *West Indians in West Africa, 1808-1880: The African Diaspora in Reverse*, (U.S.A.: U of Rochester, 2000).

dramatist in a post-Afrocentric phase. Still, the advantage of the expansion of education becomes clearer in the decades afterwards. The schools were important sites of resistance through boycotts and street protests. They became points of organisation and conscientisation. Again we must note that leaders of the Black Consciousness Movement were mission-educated and were staunch Christians.

Both Soyinka and Mda were born into Christian homes and received missionary education. As I will show later, both relate to Christianity differently. Soyinka's incorporation of religion in his works is directed by his humanistic view of identities. He absorbs Christianity creatively through the use of motifs, different from the way it is used by early Yoruba writers like Fagunwa and Tutuola. This complements his reworking of Greek society as seen in *Bacchae of Euripides* (1973). The role of Christianity as part of the colonial enterprise is never questioned. Its role in constructing ethnic identities which Soyinka draws upon for an ideal Yoruba identity is problematised along with Islam in *Death and the King's Horseman*, where the minor characters Joseph and Amusa figure as hybrid identities. Their beliefs are troubled only at the time of cultural conflict. Their core traditional beliefs hold sway at the moment of uncertainty. Soyinka's notion of identities in this regard is formed by self-agency, individual choice. But though Joseph and Amusa reject the ideological aspects of their religions, they still accept those of their Yoruba background. They are not entirely free of ideology in the secular humanistic sense. Self-agency relies not on their individuality but on their cultural background.

For Mda, Christianity is the spiritual wing of colonial hegemony. This is in contradistinction with apartheid and also with Black Consciousness. As I have stated, several of the Black Consciousness Movement leaders were practising Christians. They adapted Christianity to their oppressed situation in the form of Black Theology. For Mda Christianity prevented black South Africans from realising their true position in the state and in the economy. This he shows in *The Hill*, where the Church asks the prospective miners to accept their lowly status as immutable. In Mda's plays there is no hybrid space to accept Christianity in an African form. This is consistent with his work in theatre for development, which seeks to relate identities to changing social and economic conditions.

Anti-Colonial Struggle

Anti-colonial struggle developed on a larger space of the continent and Africa in the Diaspora. Anti-colonialism based its struggle on race and the coming together of Africans and blacks. In a resistance mode, it appropriated early colonialist historiography, making race and culture synonymous. The particularities of anti-colonial struggle are in the different ways in which colonial rule operated and in the ways it was resisted. But, as Neil Lazarus observes:

The register of anti-colonialism actively sought abstraction, desiring above all to remain free of ideological factionalism. To it, there was only today and tomorrow, bondage and freedom. It never paused long enough to give its ideal of "freedom" a content. Specificity, it implicitly rationalised, exposed the movement to the risk of division. (Lazarus, 1990: 4-5)

This middle class ideal of freedom that Lazarus describes was embodied in essentialist ideologies like Negritude and Pan-Africanism. Given the distance that colonialism kept

Africans away from the workings of power, these ideologies, as a source of identity, proved a powerful beginning for political resistance. The result of the remove from the workings of power was that the African elite possessed little more than 'an approximate bookish acquaintance with the actual and potential resources' (Fanon, 1990: 120) of their country. By reconfiguring identities on a larger scale, they could break the subject forming power of indirect rule and fulfil their basic aim of gaining political control.

Soyinka's drama is located in the register of anti-colonial abstraction. Moral outrage at African leaders dominates Soyinka's discourse on power and corruption. The moral emptiness of power-hungry African leaders allows his abstracting of African identities through myth. *A Dance of the Forests* and *Kongi's Harvest* typify Soyinka's tendency to describe power in Foucaultian terms as pervasive. In relation to identity formations, Soyinka's heroes stem mostly from the middle class who led the anti-colonial movements. Daodu and Olunde intersect the traditional/modern social hierarchy, forming hybrid identities. It was colonial policy that the children of chiefs were first educated before other classes.⁵² Again it is Soyinka's aim of setting Africa outside a binary discourse with Europe that makes him ignore these colonial formations, and brings him perilously close to seeing colonialism as 'just another episode'.

Mda, writing during the apartheid era but in exile in Lesotho, uses a different approach, one whose main cause is the contest between apartheid and anti-apartheid. Race politics in South Africa placed Africans on the same level; thus the class formations Kavanagh

⁵² Kilson, 1970: 359. Lucy Mair, 'New Elites in East and West Africa,' in Victor Turner, ed., *Colonialism in Africa, 1870-1960*, Vol. 3, (London: Cambridge UP, 1971), 167-192: 176.

says were caused by missionary education were reduced. Blacks of all classes lived in the same locations, like Sophiatown. Labour unions and student unions were visible in their organised opposition to oppression. Their resistance had a more radical tone. Also, Africans from surrounding nations sought work in South Africa as migrant labour, turning the race/power relations within South Africa into a regional one. As Jan van Wyk comments:

The term “South Africa” has its own complications. Geographically it refers to more than just a country. It includes interdependent states such as Lesotho and Swaziland. Because these countries are culturally and economically interdependent, it is not easy to distinguish, for instance between the literature produced in Lesotho and the Sotho literature written in South Africa. (van Wyk, 1996: 36)

By combining race with class Mda identifies the specific problems of the South African situation and of the independent nations in a neocolonial relationship. The social economic cultural and historical ties allow Mda’s work to take a regional perspective. In *The Road* Farmer cannot at first recognise Labourer as a foreign national, for race is the dominant factor in the power relations of South Africa. Indirect rule’s pretence of autonomy in West Africa did not have the same effect on black South Africans because of the insidious ways it was incorporated into labour practices. Hegemony extends beyond South Africa to include Southern Africa. In *The Hill*, the men are representative of the way race hegemony operates on their lives as black Africans.

Looking at the ways in which Nigeria’s formidable, westernised middle class set about anti-colonial resistance, we find that self-interest was as much a part of their reason as the

way in which they were treated by the British.⁵³ Of British attitudes George Padmore comments:

The attitude of the whites towards the blacks is something revolting. So pronounced is the hostility against educated Africans that they are even more despised than the illiterate ones. The majority of Europeans in Africa take a special delight to be rude and insulting to the educated Africans. They consider this as part of the imperial policy of “keeping blacks in their place.” (Padmore, 1969:17-8)

Robert July sees the consolidation efforts of colonialism as the beginning of the decisive action against educated and well-positioned Africans.⁵⁴ The emerging elite at first saw themselves as middlemen between African and European worlds.⁵⁵ Their attitude to colonialism was ambivalent. They enjoyed the benefits of western culture but at the same time wished to see parts of their traditional cultures retained. The emerging Nigerian middle class began to speak up for their interests, rejecting the invented traditions created by indirect rule and protesting the injustices of colonised life. They opposed colonialism in racial terms through newspapers and politically active interest groups.⁵⁶ Their ability to articulate their desire for self-rule in and on Western terms of humanism put them at the forefront of anti-colonialism.

Resistance to colonial authority was not solely the middle class initiative of nationalist calls for self-rule. Opposition occurred on several social levels, responding to the various

⁵³ James Colman, quoted in Oyekan Owomoyela, ‘Folklore and Yoruba Theatre,’ in *Critical Perspectives on Nigerian Literature*, Bernth Lindfors, ed., (London: Heinemann, 1979), 27-40: 32-3.

⁵⁴ See Robert July, *An African Voice: The Role of the Humanities in African Independence*, (Durham: Duke, 1987), 8-11.

⁵⁵ July, 12.

⁵⁶ See Basil Davidson, *The Black Man's Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation-State*, (U.S.A.: Time Books, 1992), 99-117: 113-4.

forms that colonialism presented itself through indirect rule. Other groups from disparate backgrounds resisted authority wherever their interests were threatened or where their human rights were denied. Resistance was not only against colonial administration and its local representatives but also against the missionaries and their civilising mission. The missionaries and their teachings were not automatically accepted.⁵⁷ In many cases Christianity was recognised as the spiritual wing of colonialism because the missionaries attacked indigenous artistic practices. As David Kerr observes of the missionaries, 'They realized cultural forms held the symbolic key to the religious and moral bases of indigenous societies' (Kerr, 1997: 18). It was the rejection of African instruments in the Anglican Church that led to Duro Ladipo seeking other avenues of performing.⁵⁸

Indirect rule was not passively accepted in Southern Nigeria. There are instances of insurrection in support of longstanding traditional forms of government. In June 1918 five hundred protesters were killed in the Ijemo massacre. The Egbas also reacted violently to the imposition of indirect rule in their area.⁵⁹

For the many working within the system automatic obedience to colonial law was never guaranteed. In Abeokuta, the *adire* (tie and dye cloth) makers opposed a ban by the Alake on synthetic dye. The commission set up to investigate the matter found in favour of the women. Apart from economic interest, the *adire* makers' action was also a gesture of displeasure with the political order that deposited considerable power in one person where hitherto it was spread out among individuals. Judith Byfield comments: 'Dyers

⁵⁷ Andrew Porter, 'Cultural Imperialism and Protestant Missionary Enterprise, 1780-1914,' in *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 25.3 (1997), 367-391: 387.

were implicitly critical of the unilateral power colonial rule granted local authorities.

When they rejected the *Alake*'s judgement, they also rejected the model of subordination' (Byfield, 1997: 97).

The challenge to chiefly rule was resistance to indirect rule. Not only educated Africans opposed the chiefs. New identities developed out of the opportunities provided by colonial society, especially in the city. Oppressed groups within the traditional hegemony established themselves within commerce or within the Church, as Achebe has shown.⁶⁰ Soyinka also shows this to an extent through Lakunle in *Lion*. The new cities that were springing up weakened traditional ties, but they also had positive effects:

By providing opportunities for a greater degree of specialisation, towns enabled men (and women) to acquire new skills and powers. By mixing men from a variety of social backgrounds they made possible the discovery of new points of contact and interest. Around these interests there develops a network of new associations, through which for the first time men come to think of their problems as social rather than personal; as capable of solution by human action rather than part of the natural order. Thus African towns have this two-fold aspect: seen from one standpoint, they lead to a degradation of African civilisation, with possibilities of greater liberty. Europeans and Africans who think like Europeans, tend to be preoccupied with the former aspect; the mass of Africans with the latter. (Hodgkin, 1957: 63)

The Africans who think like Europeans were the elite, those Fanon referred to as 'men of culture' who 'take their stand in the field of history' (Fanon, 1990: 168). Fanon distinguished between this group and the politicians who focus on the present, although leaders like Senghor, Sekou Toure and Julius Nyerere were one and the same. They were

⁵⁸ Kerr, 96. See also Ebun Clark, *Hubert Ogunde: The Making of Nigerian Theatre*, (Ibadan: Ibadan UP, 1979)

⁵⁹ Crowder, 203.

⁶⁰ *Things Fall Apart*, 130.

of the same educated group. Africanists and nationalist politicians collaborated in suitable recoveries of the past to oppose colonialism and legitimise their claims to power. Their collaboration sought to essentialise Africans by fixing and regulating modes of behaviour in opposition to the supposed behaviour of their colonisers.

However, marginalised Africans saw these new areas as an opportunity to combine both colonial and traditional ways. Bill Ashcroft uses the term 'interpolation' to describe the way 'in which the colonized culture interpolates the dominant discourse in order to transform it in ways that release the representation of local realities' (Ashcroft, 1998: 18). Tradition was reinforced through the modern economy. Working as waged labour earned money to pay for bride price and other expensive traditional ceremonies. Waged migrant labour was a way of escaping poverty and the oppression of chiefs and elders in the rural areas. Waged labour appealed to men as it gave them greater power over women.

Migrancy laws in South Africa forced women to remain in the rural areas while men worked in the urban areas under short and long-term contracts. The system ensured that male workers retained interests in the rural areas to which they would return. Women tended the farms, ensuring land and other properties for their male kin. Their guardianship was placed under the rural chief. So a chief people first tried to escape from as a figure of indirect rule became useful due to the pressures of the new urban culture. Chiefly authority was legitimised by this new role. This form of client-patronage broke the traditional lineage system, expanding identity from the familial to the tribal. It became one of the ways in which women became a site of power-subject formations, as

part of the general rural/traditional-urban/modern divisions. Under colonial rule in general women's rights were eroded.

From this perspective of interpolation, we can see African agency in identity formations as they reflect in drama. Soyinka's works present Africans engaging actively the criss-crossing of traditional and modern without a political ideology which, as I have noted, emanates from anti-colonial discourse. The new formations provide a narrative of individualism for the urban migrants, which dilutes the power of the chiefs. But without political discourse implicating indirect rule in chiefly power, the urban migrants freely re-enter into a class relation based on self-interest. These inflexions of identity end up focusing on a source of community either in resistance to or in support of chiefly rule. Soyinka's aversion to ideology ignores these contradictions, for he has accepted these traditional institutions as part of his discourse on authenticity. We see this in the Oyo community in *Death and the King's Horseman* and in Oba Danlola's court in *Kongi's Harvest*. Soyinka locates African identities in the individual as part of a community that incorporates these contradictions. This is against the more critical works of the later generation of Nigerian playwrights like Femi Osofisan who question the faithful use of myths in contemporary drama and offer a class-based analysis of society.⁶¹

Mda seeks out these contradictions to expose their links to hegemonic power. His own aversion to ideology works to deconstruct not only apartheid but also Black Consciousness. By analysing power, Mda, like Soyinka, centres his identities on

⁶¹ Femi Osofisan, 'Ritual and the Communal Ethos: The Humanistic Dilemma in Nigerian Theatre,' in *Okike*, 22, (1982), 72-81.

individuals and the effects these ideologies have on their material reality. But rather than base their responses on a mythic ideal, Mda's identities are subject to shifts, their dreams and ideals are challenged by the material reality of their oppressed condition. An ethnic identity or community cannot reduce its reality of oppression through mythical representation. The involvement of apartheid legislation; the use of homelands as reservoirs for labour and as part of the separate development policy; in the construction of homelands is too pernicious and too recent on the minds of South African dramatists like Mda.⁶²

All these struggles with the strands of colonialism contributed to redefining how Africans saw themselves as opposed to the colonisers' perceptions of them. Workers too defined themselves and their activities, seeking through unionisation to unite disparate groups under a single interest. But it would be the middle class who articulated the independence movement in nationalist terms that would be the biggest benefactors when the colonial powers sought a hands-off approach to controlling empire.

The Nationalists

The West African middle class was the largest in Africa.⁶³ There was no white settler presence in West Africa. The settlement of ex-slaves who held western ideals of modernisation to the region was another factor.⁶⁴ They ran newspapers⁶⁵ and published books that promoted nationalist ideologies, which sought to incorporate the interests of

⁶² See Lewis Nkosi, *Tasks and Masks: Themes and Styles of African Literature*, (London: Longman, 1981), 79.

⁶³ Kilson, 352.

⁶⁴ Blyden.

⁶⁵ For the history of the Nigerian press and politics during the colonial period, see Fred Omu, *Press and Politics in Nigeria, 1880-1937*, (London: Longman, 1978).

the many, rather than the few under the entity of the nation. Ideas of socialism and independence were brought back by the nationalist frontrunners. They studied abroad and came into contact with Africans in the Diaspora. The nationalists offered a Pan-African vision of self-rule and a strong notion of African identity.⁶⁶ For example, Nigerian students in London established the West African Students Union in 1925. The union lobbied British politicians for reforms and formed links with other Africans to foster ‘national consciousness, racial pride, self-help, unity and cooperation among Africans’ (Falola, 1999, 83). Earlier associations like the National Congress of British West Africa (est. 1920) were formed to ‘fight against discrimination, unite the West African elite, and achieve self-government’ (Falola, 1999: 83-4). A branch of the Garvey Movement was established in Lagos in 1920.

Several writers from the Diaspora in and outside Africa preceded their motivations.⁶⁷

John Jacob Thomas, a Trinidadian schoolteacher, took on James Anthony Froude, an eminent Victorian historian over his views of blacks in the West Indies, and is regarded as anticipating postcolonial studies.⁶⁸ African-Americans exerted influence on black South African intellectuals. In the 1920s, black South Africans modelled themselves on the activities of the African American ‘Talented Tenth’.⁶⁹ ‘The Africans learned from African Americans the process of transforming themselves into agents in or of

⁶⁶ See Hollis R. Lynch, ‘Pan-African Responses in the United States to British Colonial rule in Africa in the 1940s,’ in Prosser Gifford and Wm Roger Louis, eds., *The Transfer of Power in Africa: Decolonisation, 1940-1960*, (U.S.A.: Yale UP, 1982): 57-86.

⁶⁷ For an overview of these writings and the writers, see Patrick Williams, ‘West African Writing,’ in M-H Msiska and Paul Hyland eds., *Writing and Africa*, (London: Longman, 1997), 31-45.

⁶⁸ Sukhdev Sandhu, ‘The War of the Words,’ *Independent*, 3 July 1999. See John Jacob Thomas, *Froudacity*, (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1889). On the influence of West Indians in South Africa, see Alan Gregor Copley, ‘“Far from Home”: The Origins and Significance of the Afro-Caribbean Community in South Africa to 1930,’ in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 18.2, (1992), 349-70.

⁶⁹ Coined by William Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; London: Penguin, 1996), 87.

modernity' (Masilela, 1996: 90). Like their West African counterparts, black-run South African newspapers were an effective medium for publicising their ideas. The link between black South African and African American intellectuals was founded on 'political solidarity, intellectual affiliations, cultural retainments, and historical appropriations' (Masilela, 1996: 90). The similarities of their social condition made it impossible for them to ignore each other. Those inspired by the African Americans included Sol Plaatje and H.I.E Dhlomo,⁷⁰ regarded as the father of black South African theatre. Founding members of the African National Congress (est. 1912) were similarly influenced. During this period, black South African intellectuals embraced European liberalism, using 'the language of the European Enlightenment to defend the idea and practice of universal rights' (Kruger, 1999: 24). These 'New Africans' saw the whites as their mentors, and this was reflected in pre-apartheid literature. Increasing segregation brought a halt to such sentiment, and 'by 1936 no member of the majority could any longer mimic in novel writing the genre into which he or she was being written: the philanthropic forces of civil society that were doing that writing were manifestly not influencing the state' (Pechey, 1994: 31).

I have said that integral to the nationalists' political activities was a systematic use of invented traditions to harmonise a national sense among the disparate groups that formed the nation-state after independence. They based claims of leadership on excavated appropriate myths and histories. These myths, founded on racial pride, were re-interpreted and updated as part of the contemporary independence struggles. They were

⁷⁰ See Tim Couzens, *The New African: A Study of the Life and Works of H.I.E. Dhlomo*, (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1985). N. Visser and Tim Couzens, eds., 'Introduction to H.I.E. Dhlomo' in *Collected Works*, (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1985).

seen as necessary to the anti-colonial struggles because they ‘had to create new and powerful identities for colonised peoples and to challenge colonialism not only at a political or intellectual level, but also on an emotional plane. In widely divergent contexts, the idea of the nation was a powerful vehicle for harnessing anti-colonial energies at all these levels’ (Loomba, 1998: 185-6). Reconstructing existing myths post-independence aimed at transferring individual loyalties from the ethnic to the national and thus be seen as a single force, initiating history through self-agency. But ethnic loyalties were strong, as they had been backed by not only colonial power. They had been invested with authority by the rewritten histories of the mission-educated Africans, some of whom were now independence nationalists. The majority of Africans never met a European, since the chief was the face of colonial power. The breaking of chiefly power was part of Kwame Nkrumah’s strategy for winning the election in Ghana to become its first independent president in 1957.⁷¹

The chiefs continued to wield influence in independent Nigeria. The lack of a reconstructed administration meant that structurally, there was difficulty in hoisting a national identity on its various ethnic groups. Before independence, ethnic identities showed little sign of waning. The privileging of regional over national interests led to several constitutional changes and a weak centre close to independence.⁷² This allowed traditional rulers to play a vital role in politics.⁷³

⁷¹ Wm Louis and Roger Robinson, ‘The Imperialism of Decolonization,’ in *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 22.3 (1994), 462-511: 485.

⁷² See Ali Mazrui and Michael Tidy, *Nationalism and New States in Africa*, (London: Heinemann, 1984), 92-95.

The personality cult was a manifestation of the use of invented traditions on the part of Africanists and nationalists before and after independence.⁷⁴ The charisma⁷⁵ of certain individuals helped maintain a national focus, which dissolved when these figures left public office.⁷⁶ Part of the election strategy that they retained after entering office was the use of political 'ritual' which Kilson defines as 'the adornment of the leadership role with extraneous motifs, ideological and personal, that have no intrinsically functional relation to that role. This results in a tendency to treat the ritualistic or "acting-out" aspects of the leadership role as if they were substantive' (Kilson, 1970: 387). Using the Ghanaian example of Nkrumah's style of campaigning and leadership, Kilson says that political ritual appealed to the rural class because they identified with the 'ritual aspects of rule as essential to the exercise of authority' (Kilson, 1970: 388). In this way the African political class wielded power in the same way as their former colonial rulers: to impress and convince their subjects that they were the legitimate masters.⁷⁷ Broadly, African leaders picked up several features of colonial rule. 'Its power to crush those who opposed it impressed the Nigerian peoples generally and the nationalist leaders particularly. This impression led them to magnify the power of government, a power that was already linked in their minds with transforming modernization in society' (O'Connell, 1989: 7).

⁷³ See Olufemi Vaughan, 'Chieftancy Politics and Social Relations in Nigeria,' in *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*. 29.3 (1991), 308-326. Eghosa E. Osaghae, 'The Strengthening of Local Governments and the Operation of Federalism in Nigeria,' in *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*. 3, (1989), 347-364.

⁷⁴ Isidore Okpewho, 'African Mythology and Africa's Political Impasse,' in *Research in African Literatures* 29.1 (1998), 1.

⁷⁵ Max Weber lists charisma as one of the three types of 'legitimate authority'. Charismatic authority rests on, 'devotion to the specific and exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns of order revealed or ordained by him (charismatic authority)'. See Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, Vol. 1, Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, eds., (New York: Bedminster Press, 1968, 24-5.

⁷⁶ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, (London: Fontana, 1993), 239.

⁷⁷ Michael Crowder, 'The White Chiefs of Tropical Africa,' 320-50.

Inventing a national identity grew out of the response of the African middle class to their exclusion in the affairs of state during colonial rule. In French West Africa it arose as a reaction to the reality of the French policy of association and assimilation, which alienated the national elite from their compatriots. The French policy of assimilation sought to efface cultures they regarded as inferior. France was seen as an edifice at the highest stage of culture and every opportunity was used to convey this impression. As J.L. Hymans states:

The French theory of cultural assimilation was based on the belief that there existed but one type of man, one universal civilisation, of which the West provided the most perfect example. According to those who held this idea, in order to become completely civilised, it was necessary to become “completely European, preferably French”. (Hymans: 1971, 18)

The interests of assimilated Africans were synonymous with French interests, as Roland Barthes’ showed with the photograph of the black soldier saluting the French flag.⁷⁸ The rejection of this conditioning was a philosophical and cultural statement: Negritude. Leopold Sedar Senghor defined Negritude as ‘*the whole complex of civilised values – cultural, economic, social and political – which characterise the black peoples...*’ (Senghor, 1998: 440). Negritude was meant to awaken the distinct characteristics that made Africans what they were and to live by them. It was a recovery system constructed to regain the pride of the black race for their culture and history, which had been denigrated, even denied existence by colonialism. Negritude was a way of engaging with the rest of the world culturally by an exposition of the black person’s unique way of thinking. In this regard Negritude positioned itself in opposition to white racism, a binary

⁷⁸ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, (1957; London: Vintage, 2000), 116.

mode. The most obvious example is Senghor's assertion of the emotion/reason dichotomy as an ontological difference between the two races. Negritude sought to define a black attitude to the racism of colonialism, rather than desire a wholesale return to a pre-colonial past. History was important because of how colonialism tried to empty Africans of their past.⁷⁹ The reason for colonialism negating Africa's history, as I have said, was to set Africa on Europe's historical path as a subordinate. Senghor saw Negritude as a complement to European values, as a contribution to 'the Civilisation of the Universal' (Senghor, 1998: 441). Negritude took several forms, and this leads Kwaku Asante-Darko to argue that the aggressive anti-racist form has been subsumed into a more conciliatory whole.⁸⁰

British African writers like Wole Soyinka⁸¹ in Nigeria and Es'kia Mphahlele⁸² in South Africa were sceptical of Negritude. Soyinka does not contest the aims of Negritude but criticises what he sees is its over-simplification, stating: 'Its re-entrenchment of black values was not preceded by any profound effort to enter into this African system of values' (*Myth*, 1995: 127). He highlights the Manichean foundation of its dialectic. Mphahlele asserts that 'The South African, East African and English-speaking West African do not worry over negritude because they have never lost the essence of the Negro-ness' (284-5). This essential core is what Soyinka emphasises in his own ideal identity construction. Nevertheless British Africans engaged with European modernity and fought to gain a position within its structure. Rejection by the British motivated their

⁷⁹ Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (London: Penguin, 1990), 169.

⁸⁰ Kwaku Asante-Darko, 'The Co-Centrality of Racial Conciliation in Negritudinal Literature,' in *Research in African Literatures*, 31.2, (2000), 151-162.

⁸¹ *Myth, Literature and the African World*, (1976; Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), 126-39.

cultural nationalism and later led to the independence movement. That the British never carried out a policy of assimilation did not lessen their superiority complex as regards race, even if indirect rule gave the impression that it did. To gain independence, the nationalists used the Western Enlightenment terms of humanism to construct new identities of self-agency.

Soyinka's criticism of Negritude is not a rejection of its philosophy. He questions its tendency to place Africans in an essential bind with Europe as its other. Both Soyinka's ideal identity construction and Negritude's recovery project seek an African alternative to the discredited European humanism that engendered indirect rule, assimilation and apartheid. These systems all came out of a European humanism that denied its own principles of equality.⁸³ But Soyinka too enlists a suitable recovery that rejects the very systemisation of thought that he accuses Negritude of not having. Negritude must be seen in its historical and social perspective, as arising out of French colonialism. Negritude did not always emphasise a racial essentialism.⁸⁴ It has been modified down the years⁸⁵ and so cannot be seen as a single, unchanging theory, in the same way we cannot speak of postcolonial 'theory'. To do so would be to remove Negritude from the material conditions of colonialism that gave rise to it in the first place.

West African nationalism was not radical. Independence was won by negotiation rather than by armed resistance. This was not the case in East Africa, the Lusophone countries,

⁸² Es'kia Mphahlele, 'Remarks on Negritude,' in J.L. Hymans, *Léopold Sédar Senghor: An Intellectual Biography*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1971), 284-5.

⁸³ See Robert Young, 'Colonialism and Humanism,' in James Donald and Ali Rattansi, *Race, Culture and Difference*, (London: Sage, 1992), 243-51.

⁸⁴ A. James Arnold, *Negritude and Modernism: The Poetry and Poetics of Aime Cesaire*, (NY: Harvard UP, 1981), 44.

or in Algeria. Pre-independence constitutional changes in Nigeria reflect the bartering between the political parties and the British government. Cote d'Ivoire's Houphouët-Boigny toned down his radicalism before the French negotiated with him. Louis and Robinson write that the British handover of power was more to do with the fact that, 'more than a project of the British state, imperial sway by 1939 derived mainly from profit-sharing business and power-sharing with indigenous elites overseas. The final settlement would be with nationalist successors who would secure British economic and strategic assets under informal tutelage' (Louis, 1994: 463). The inability to escape from the sphere of the departed colonial power⁸⁶ and the lack of moral leadership are themes African drama continues to address in its post-Afrocentric phase.⁸⁷

Generally African dramatists belong to the middle class and, like Fanon, they understood that independence was only the beginning and not the end of nationhood. They found their own ideas for the nation incompatible with that of the political elite. The dramatist had to forgo Pan-Africanism, and concentrate on matters more immediately related to the nation. The national elite, to retain power at all costs, used ideologies of liberation. Revathi Krisnaswamy sees the act of 're-territorialising' in post-colonial literature as compatible with 'hegemonic post-modern theories', as its focus on the local fragments discourse and, quoting the authors of *The Empire Writes Back*,⁸⁸ asserts a 'localized post-colonial identity based on notions of purity and difference' (in Krisnaswamy, 1995: 139-140). But the dramatist could not continue Pan-Africanism when ethnicities within

⁸⁵ Arnold, 61-3.

⁸⁶ Sanya Osha, 'Writing in a Continent Under Siege,' in *Research in African Literatures*, 29.1 (1998), 174-177: 177.

⁸⁷ Lazarus.

⁸⁸ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, (London: Routledge, 1989).

colonial boundaries were in conflict with each other. African dramatists like Soyinka focused on the local not as a reception to postmodernism but as a search for order within an indigenous context outside the confines of colonial influence, and this could only be done within a smaller, homogeneous space. The issue for identity constructions is not that Soyinka's plays appear nativistic⁸⁹ but that they still remain within the colonial discourse that he wishes to disengage from.

Black South African writers of the 1970s and 1980s worked within the liberation paradigm because of the immediacy of race oppression. Black Consciousness was their philosophy, which, like Negritude, was a recovery project aimed at retrieving black dignity through an attitude of blackness. Black Consciousness was a mainly urban movement and so it dealt with township issues. Mda interrogates Black Consciousness discourse through an anti-liberal humanism. Like his contemporaries of Black Consciousness theatre, he cannot avoid the material effects of apartheid. By adopting a theatre for development model, Mda follows the Black Consciousness model of theatre for conscientisation. He extends the model by widening its concerns to deal with the effects of oppression on women and on those in the rural areas. Mda breaks the false dichotomies of the traditional-rural and modern-urban by showing that they are constituted by the same hegemonic discourse. By showing how oppression works through hegemonic practices, Mda reveals how the urban and rural areas are linked integrally by apartheid. The theatre for development model works differently from Black Consciousness in raising consciousness as it emphasises self-help and individual critical

⁸⁹ We can locate Soyinka's anti-nationalism with his perceived nativism, through James Clifford's rejection of using local culture as representative of the culture of the larger nation-state. Clifford, 22.

awareness as the basis of group awareness. Theatre for development opens the criteria of oppression to a wider canvas: class, race, tradition and culture. Mda's scepticism of ideology extends to Black Consciousness in this regard. I will expatiate on Mda's relationship with Black Consciousness in a later chapter.

African dramatists have taken an individualistic approach in an attempt to define African identities in the wake of post-independence reality. In articulating an authentic African-ness, the representations of the dramatist and writer focus on individuals negotiating change within the political economy of modernity. Whether it is Ayi Kwei Armah's metaphysical oneness, Gcina Mhlophe's locating of women in the margins of traditional and modern society or Ngugi's materialist critique of the nation-state, these writers bring to the post-independent state their own personal vision and testimony. This strategy occurs even when the call is for a return to communal African collectiveness or to promote an ideology.

The colonial experience has played the determining role in defining an African identity and therefore it has shaped African drama decisively. Drama has had to respond to and reflect changes within society, changes that remain within the ambit of a neocolonial modernity. Drama fulfils a relevant social function, not only as a means of preserving traditional ties against encroaching capitalism. In Southern Africa the new 'peasant class' of farmers and villagers used the festival to spend excess money which would have otherwise gone to the colonial government through taxation. In this way it was a form of

resistance against economic exploitation and alienating social values.⁹⁰ Using the example of Yoruba traditional theatre, Kerr shows that pre-colonial African societies were neither static nor simply organised, but served the class interests of the time.⁹¹

Theatre served as a means of engaging traditional society, subverting legal and social constraints such as patriarchy and the age-order.⁹² This social aspect of African drama represents an important continuity between its written and oral forms and past and present functions.

The social consciousness of drama has directly involved the use of language, which has been the topic of many debates.⁹³ The language question results from the role of indirect rule in identity formations. As one commentator has noted, any language can be 'a weapon of either colonisation or liberation' (Mazrui, 1992: 71). In this respect, 'language is not the neutral tool of an honest desire to tell the truth... but an instrumental tool for constructing history and inventing realities' (O'Gorman, 1961: 122). The colonisers' language has been the catalyst for creating Pan-African identities. Black South Africans saw Afrikaans as a language of oppression in the 1960s and 1970s, and defied the authorities by using English as a tool for self-identification. It was used to communicate across several language groups and for reconstituting Africans as a homogenous 'black' to counter the bantustan policy. During the nationalist phase in Nigeria, Hubert Ogunde performed in English to increase the reach outside of his linguistic area.⁹⁴ This does not

⁹⁰ David Kerr, *African Popular Theatre*, (Oxford: James Currey, 1997), 49.

⁹¹ Kerr, 14.

⁹² Ngandu Nkashama, 'Theatricality and Social Mimodrama,' in *Research in African Literatures*, 30.4 (1999), 176-185: 177.

⁹³ See Chinua Achebe, 'The African Writer and the English Language,' 428-34, and Ngugi wa Thiongo, 'The Language of African Literature' 435-55, in Williams and Chrisman.

⁹⁴ Kerr, 90.

diminish the importance of indigenous languages. Colonial languages serve as administrative languages in the modern states and to this extent have excluded the majority of Africans who are non-speakers. They have created a dichotomy between the language areas of former colonial territories and consolidated the relations of the African middle class with Western cosmopolitan centres. The fact is that today, English is the language of choice for world communication. What this development means to Africans is determined by the extent to which this can be turned into an advantage in today's globalised world. In literature English has expanded the market for African writing to Europe and more importantly, to the Diaspora. It is the language through which anti-colonial and postcolonial discourse has been deliberated across the Commonwealth. British West African literature has adapted English to its own linguistic registers. These nations possess a higher number of indigenous language literatures than Francophone Africa, whose policy of assimilation alienated its intellectuals from their culture.⁹⁵ French colonial policy and Islam impacted on the thematic content of Francophone drama, making indigenous themes undesirable.⁹⁶ In general, modern Africa drama continues to recover a usable past to return Africa to its own historic path to progress.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to convey the complexity of historical and ideological processes that have shaped African identities. These processes have taken place due to colonialism and its administrative structure of indirect rule. Colonialism was not a monolithic enterprise and neither was resistance to it. From a myriad of identities the

⁹⁵ Fredric Michelman, 'French and British Colonial Language Policies: A Comparative View of Their Impact on African Literature,' in Kofi Anyidoho, Abena Busia and Anne Adams, 181-193: 182.

nationalist interpolation was dominant in idealising Pan-African and national identities, subsuming other definitions into its vague, non-specific ideology. Anti-colonialism, the basis for its ascendancy, highlighted its limitations as a progressive ideology. It has been exposed as a tool for the indigenous bourgeois appropriation of the spoils of the nation. This has been the major concern of African dramatists, leading to scepticism on the ability of the nation-state to provide for Africans. Ideas about authenticity sustain notions of identity as germane to the continuing discovery of self-agency.

Works by prominent writers suggest that there is a continuing dialogue with and within the middle class. Committed writers like Femi Osofisan still see the middle class as the best hope for bringing the continent out of its troubles.⁹⁷ So did Fanon. But this can only come when the middle class abstains from interpreting development according to Western concepts and identifies with the objectives of Africans. The tendency to do otherwise, to determine progress according to the Western-dominated globalisation accords the middle class the position of what Soyinka calls that of the privileged slave. The ruling elite continues to govern with the urban-rural dichotomy intact, perpetuating the effects of indirect rule and the colonial bias of certain economically viable areas over others.⁹⁸ Natural resources are a major source of conflicts in Africa today.

Postcolonial theories provide a counter-discourse to the grand narrative of history and therefore write out of this same history. They provide a template for inserting the so-

⁹⁶ John Conteh-Morgan, *Theatre and Drama in Francophone Africa*, (U.K.: Cambridge UP: 1994), 26-9.

⁹⁷ Femi Osofisan, "The Revolution as Muse": Drama as Surreptitious Insurrection in a Post-Colonial, Military State,' in Richard Boon and Jane Plastow, eds., *Theatre Matters: Performance and Culture on the World Stage*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), 11-35: 14.

⁹⁸ Mamdani.

called peripheral narratives into the spaces of absence that were formerly filled by European constructions of the 'other'. In freeing up the will to identity from the binary formula, postcolonial theories have unleashed their own representations that emanate from the local. Still, the question arises as to the purpose these representations serve outside of the text, and also that they are produced mainly from Western institutions. If the text is the main transmitter of these knowledges, their power is reduced by limited access outside the institution. Like Negritude, postcolonial theories are reduced to a discursive practice of alienated intellectuals. At best postcolonial theories represent Africa in the Western discursive practices of the not-so-new age of postmodernism.

For the African dramatist, material experience must be the entry point into a discourse of difference. It is from these references that a non-Eurocentric universality can gain legitimacy. Our notions of culture have to bear in mind that they derive from effort and are not naturally given. Thus they are subject to constant shifts. The political space needs a sense of order to maintain a national or Pan-African identity. As I have shown these identities were subject to their historical moments. Drama enables voices pushed to the margins to claim the centre, as practitioners such as the late Ken Saro-Wiwa and the South African dramatists of the Black Consciousness era have demonstrated. Identities remain unstable, yet at the same time they direct a peoples' attention to any threat to undermine their right to self-determination. Rather than destabilise a nation, drama can harmonise difference through a social contract of understanding. This is typified by Mda's theatre for development.

The attempt by the artist of re-inventing a nation and its people is not particular to the African continent.⁹⁹ The fragility of the political state can be considered as concrete proof of the fallacy that is the 'nation'. Yet its endurance proves that "the end of the era of nationalism," so long prophesied, is not remotely in sight. Indeed, nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time' (Anderson, 1991: 3). The fact of the constructedness of the nation leaves the writer in a quandary over how to write of African identities. Some of the characteristics of national 'character' still retain elements of the unreconstructed colonial administrative apparatus. At the same time it opens up creative opportunities for the ordering of chaos, as Calvino has noted.

Dramatists engage with the complexities of history. The content of their work is linked inextricably with colonialist historiography. In trying to reclaim an authentic path the dramatist must first negotiate this defining moment in history. Indirect rule, with the aid of missionary education, fashioned some of the traditions that are used to authenticate ethnic identities within the nation-state today. Confronting these complexities is what has led dramatists like Wole Soyinka and Zakes Mda to offer a humanistic notion of identity as a self-authenticating paradigm for African identities. Their approaches towards reaching this goal form the basis of the following chapters.

⁹⁹ See Cathy Jrade, 'Modernist Poetry,' in Robert Gonzalez Echevarria and Enrico Pupo-Walker, eds., *The Cambridge History of Latin American History*, Vol.2 (U.K.: Cambridge UP, 1996), 7-68, on modernist poetry in Latin America and Bill Ashcroft, 'Modernity's First Born: Latin America and Post-Colonial Transformation,' in *ARIEL* 29.2 (1998), 7-29, on how South American writers responded creatively to colonialism and independence in their region. See also Susan Bassnett, *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 14-5, for how, on a forgery, Czech literature came to 'forge' a powerful notion of national identity.

Chapter Two

The Dramatic Theories of Wole Soyinka and Zakes Mda

In this chapter I look at how the dramatic theories of Soyinka and Mda reflect identity formations, on the social and historical developments set out in Chapter One. My aim is to draw a correlation between identity patterns shaped by indirect rule, and how both writers envisage authentic African identities. Soyinka and Mda construct their African identities through a similar notion of African humanism. What differentiates their constructions is the way in which their regions developed out of colonialism and apartheid. Both writers reject the identities of indirect rule by interrogating the resistance ideologies that set themselves in opposition to colonial/apartheid identifying practices. Their interrogation is what Olaniyan terms post-Afrocentric. These resistance ideologies homogenise African identities, excluding pre-colonial heterogeneity and the multiplicity of identities that were not only formed by but grew out of rejection to indirect rule.

In the first part of this chapter, I look at Soyinka's mythical constructions of African identity. I take into account the Yoruba concept of identity, Soyinka's own appropriation of Ogun as a model of African identities and the issues raised by using particular myths to represent a continental construction of identities. I look at Soyinka's conceptualising of Yoruba tragedy as a way of forwarding his idea of African identity. I end the section by looking at how Soyinka's mythic-tragic identity construction works in *The Strong Breed*.

Soyinka and the Representation of Authentic African Identities

Here, I look at the indigenous influences in Soyinka's work through his theoretical treatment of African drama. In *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1976), Soyinka bases his dramatic theory on the exceptional African mind. By looking at his perception of African uniqueness, his construction of an African identity through Yoruba myth and his formulating of a Yoruba aesthetic of tragedy, I will see how Soyinka tries to escape the colonial influence through his notion of authenticity. Soyinka bases his notion on the construction of an identity fixed in the Yoruba world. By doing so he evades the subjective Eurocentric gaze and centres the Yoruba subject as the determining factor of experience. Colonial historiography did not grant Africans individuality. Difference was noted in ethnic terms only, with the tribe as the site of identity. By delimiting the invasiveness of colonialism, Soyinka constructs identities not as merely resisting subjects but as actors in a world where colonialism forms only a part. He argues for this view in the introduction to *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975), where Soyinka asks that colonialism should be seen as 'an incident, a catalytic incident merely' (Soyinka, 1998: 145). Indirect rule in Nigeria, where the face of colonial authority was that of the indigenous rulers and identity was located in ethnicity, forms a double-bind for Soyinka's project. Indirect rule allowed for the development of ethnic histories, such as the one he utilises in *Death*. At the same time it is a source of invented traditions, which were compatible with the colonial project of administrative and economic control.

Indirect rule was an intrusive form of administration.¹ By attempting to place authentic constructions of identity within a local space, Soyinka ignores the social and economic changes to those very localities. *Death* cannot be seen as a drama about two declining empires. For the Oyos, British colonialism was not a waning power.² Vaughan notes the interventions in political structures in Yorubaland by colonial administrators.³

In order to delimit colonial intervention Soyinka sets an authentic African identity in a metaphysics of mind. Yet construction of local identities was part of the political strategies between the colonial powers and the ethnic groups that fell within the new nation-states. Indirect rule was an active agent in shaping traditional authority and the traditions that developed from it.⁴ As Bhabha points out, the new identities can never be seen as unproblematic. In *Death*, colonial rule serves only as an historical background. But it inserts itself into a reading of events and identities through indirect rule, as seen in the new identity formations of Olunde, the servants and the market women's daughters.

Using Yoruba culture, Soyinka defines African identity as essentially incorporative and multi-dimensional. Hybridity therefore is a cultural attribute of the Yoruba and not a condition caused by the colonial encounter. Bhabha's later theory complicates hybrid identities, especially after the colonial power has departed. For Bhabha:

What is irredeemably estranging in the presence of the hybrid – in the symbol of colonial difference – is that the difference of cultures can no longer be identified

¹ Rattray, ix.

² During World War Two, Britain still used force to break nationalist resistance in Egypt, India and Iran. See Louis and Robinson, 462-3.

³ Vaughan, 310.

⁴ Isichei, 392.

or evaluated as objects of epistemological or moral contemplation: cultural differences are not simply there to be seen or appropriated. (Bhabha, 1995: 114)

Bhabha points to a problem of cultural appropriation. If we include the material effects of colonial domination, the imposition of indirect rule, then African dramatists like Soyinka cannot ignore this problem. Soyinka's theoretical writing predates Bhabha's work.

Soyinka links his theory to and privileges his Yoruba environment. I emphasise the importance of Yoruba culture in Soyinka's thinking due to the tendency to attribute his syncretic qualities to his humanism, which privileges his Western influences and have led to accusations of Eurocentrism against him.⁵ This literary imaginative tradition which his humanistic outlook stems from could not be possible if it was not part of the Yorubas' cultural attitudes. Soyinka descends from a tradition of Yoruba writers whose works reflect these multi-dimensions, writers such as D.O. Fagunwa and Amos Tutuola, whose works in Western literary terms may be described as magic realism.⁶ Their world is one in which both modernity and tradition co-habit without contradiction, where African and Western cultures and religion reside harmoniously and their characters' identities remain unambiguously 'Yoruba'.

Soyinka reinvigorates Yoruba culture while at the same time retains its distinctiveness. He translated D.O. Fagunwa's *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale* (1938), as *A Forest of a Thousand Demons* (1968). In this story, the indigenous culture is in an unproblematic relationship with European modernity. Fagunwa's story is heavily influenced by Christianity, which he fuses with Yoruba culture to create a total world. Amos Tutuola

⁵ See, for instance, Chinweizu, Onwucheka Jemie and Ihechukwu Madubuike, *Towards the Decolonization of African Literature*, (London: KPI, 1985), 196-208.

presents a similar case in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952) and *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1954).⁷ Soyinka writes out of this tradition, extending it as a rendering of a unique African identity and as a claim of universal humanism.

Set in this cultural context, Soyinka's worldview sustains his antipathy to ideology, seeing it as restrictive to human potentiality. Soyinka echoes George Orwell's opinion that 'a writer can only remain honest if he keeps free of party labels' (Orwell, 2001: 2). Soyinka relates to diverse cultures without compromising his Yoruba sensibilities, claiming this assimilationist trait as essentially African. This claim is problematic, given the cultural diversity of Africa and the multi-faceted response of Africans to colonialism.⁸ In Nigeria itself, colonialism was an uneven process requiring different approaches to different ethnic groups. A leap of faith is needed to verify the ontological unity of the continent in the way Mazisi Kunene articulates:

The very idea of humanity is perceived in the Western system as occurring within a moral category, whereas in the African system, humanity is regarded as the sum-total of those qualities that require social action to activate them: therefore, the African idea of humanity presupposes a potentiality and not, as in the Western system, a concept of moral rectitude. (Kunene, 1992: 36)

Kunene qualifies an African ontology opposite its European other, and not in and of itself. We shall see later that Soyinka's heroes work within a concept of moral rectitude

⁶ See Brenda Cooper, *Magical Realism in West African Fiction: Citing a Third Eye*, (London: Routledge, 1998).

⁷ Mineke Schipper comments that the world-view of Tutuola's heroes is optimistic and confident. They 'always come back home to their unchanged traditional setting. From his perspective, the identity of traditional man is neither threatened nor called into question. In his view there are no things falling apart, there is no question of negritude nor conflict of cultures'. Mineke Schipper, *Beyond the Boundaries: African Literature and Literary Theory*, (London: Allison and Busby, 1989), 78.

⁸ Soyinka's substituting Yoruba culture for African culture is viewed as problematic. His being an African writer is less of a problem, as he deals with post-independence problems similarly addressed by his fellow African writers. See K.A. Appiah, *In My Father's House*, (London: Methuen: 1992), 126-133.

that Kunene upholds as a Western concept of humanity. Kunene's description of African humanity as potential realised through acting in the social sphere echoes Soyinka's theory of individuals operating in a social milieu. Potentiality is not programmed by ideology; it is an instinctual response to a social occasion. Instinct promotes action, thus accommodating new experiences in a culture. Hence Soyinka's presentation of Ogun, whose personality is amenable to new experience, as his ideal of Yoruba personality. In Yoruba ritual the nature of this potentiality is evident in the rejection of rigid structures of performance.⁹ Yet within this space Soyinka asserts particularity. Continuity in the shape of the cyclical nature of the African world binds the several associations of new experience.¹⁰ But the new experiences are brought about by colonialism. Soyinka cannot escape the binary oppositions tying these new formations together. For example, of the differences between African drama and European drama, Soyinka makes an ontological distinction between the African and Western states of mind. The Westerner has a separatist mentality as opposed to the holistic African.¹¹ Earlier Soyinka stated that it is only the peculiar myths and histories that distinguish peoples from each other, and in common all cultures possess 'complementarity'.¹² Soyinka's positioning of the uniqueness of African drama in the nature of the African mind rather than in the structure of drama resembles a Negritude binary formula of identity construction based on essentialism.

⁹ See Margaret Drewel, *Yoruba Ritual: Performers, Play, Ritual*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).

¹⁰ See Daniel Kunene, 'Journey in the African Epic,' in *Research in African Literatures*, 22.2 (1991): 205-223. Robert Fraser shows how post-colonial writers adapt their indigenous chronologies to Europeans forms of fiction in *Lifting the Sentence: A poetics of Postcolonial Fiction*, (Manchester/New York: Manchester UP, 200), 169-188.

¹¹ Soyinka, 1995: 37.

¹² Soyinka, xi.

Soyinka's project is one of self-apprehension rather than of the negation he sees as prevalent in essentialist discourse, hence his scepticism towards Negritude. His resistance to ideology intertwines with his humanism, which he refuses to cede primacy to European cultures, which developed out of their own historical experience.¹³ Soyinka bases his recovery project on the retrieval of the historical terms of progress within an African humanism. Soyinka's attempt to escape the binary opposition of Western discourse and Afrocentrism is by staking ontological claims of African-ness (Yoruba-ness) and then by pursuing his artistic project with a free will. Freedom to be human is Soyinka's final destination, a similar stop desired by Fanon, Cabral and Senghor. Soyinka does this by relocating diverse influences to his Yoruba culture, uprooting them from their social and cultural contexts.¹⁴ Placed within his Yoruba society, these influences are in form rather than in content. *Death, Bacchae of Euripides* and *Opera Wonyosi* reflect influences of Shakespeare, Greek tragedy and Bertolt Brecht transposed to a Nigerian social setting. As a creative writer, 'there is no contradiction between a commitment to cultural nationalism and an active relationship with foreign literatures' (Green, 1984:55).

Despite Soyinka's indigenisation of non-African sources the charge of Eurocentrism is made against him. Bruce King, in contrast with Robert Green, states that 'Nationalism aims at... rejection of cosmopolitan upper classes, intellectuals and others likely to be influenced by foreign ideas' (King, 1980: 42). In Chapter One I showed how it was

¹³ Soyinka, x.

¹⁴ Commenting on Soyinka's version of *The Bacchae*, Chantal Zabus says, 'Contrary to the many post-colonial rewritings of, for example, Shakespeare's *The Tempest* or Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* as fables of Western imperialism, it would seem that terrorist writing and the scriptural murder of the colonizer were not part of Soyinka's agenda.' This extends my argument of Soyinka writing from within his own society, absenting the influence of colonial power for purposes of authenticity. See Chantal Zabus, 'The Yoruba Bacchae: Wole Soyinka's Dearyanization of Greek Civilisation' in Theo D'Haen, ed., *(Un)Writing Empire*, (Netherlands: Rodopi, 1998), 203-228: 204.

through foreign travel and missionary education that the Nationalists learned how to articulate their calls for independence. Afrocentrism, a cosmopolitan discourse itself, which takes a pristine invention of Africa as its field of authentic representations, also rejected foreign influence. In identity formation, Soyinka reduces his field to his own culture, limiting 'cultural nationalism' to the local, rather than to the nation. This is due to the failure of the nation-state to forge a national identity and move progressively towards development. Soyinka is sceptical of the nation and national ideology as a way out of Africa's post-independence impasse.¹⁵ The Nigerian Civil War and his incarceration during the conflict solidified his views of the nation as an inauthentic space.

Soyinka considers the nation as a colonial creation.¹⁶ He sees ethnic identity as authentic. This assumption belies the role of indirect rule and the missionaries in creating these identities. They reject the fact that the stability of local identities rests on the success of the colonising mission. The role of the anti-colonialists and nationalists was constructed by the engagement with colonialism. Soyinka's idealistic interpretation of Yoruba identity also denies the political aspect of identity formations pre-colonial¹⁷ and post-independence.

Although Soyinka is anti-ideology, like most African dramatists he is critical of the ruling classes. Moral outrage forms his critical criteria and political aesthetic. His identities are formed out of the personal struggle for the common good; his questioning heroes contest society's status quo, refusing to accept the invented traditions imposed by the ruling

¹⁵ Soyinka, 175.

¹⁶ Soyinka, 1972: 175.

hegemony. Their authenticity comes from their own conscience – self-awareness – as human subjects formed within a community, as seen through the definitions of Mead, Lacan and Freud in Chapter One. Soyinka's heroes are timeless men shaped by the core beliefs of their societies, which are caught in flux.¹⁸ Forgetting these core beliefs causes the tensions that call for self-sacrifice. That Soyinka is influenced by other cultures is not in doubt. The syncretic dynamic that he claims resides in Yoruba culture makes this possible.

A problem arises when Soyinka uses his culture as an example of African identity formations, for by doing so he takes its historical and material developments with him. Soyinka speaks for Africa of the ravages of imperialism and slavery, yet these ravages were felt differently in a way that an essentialist reading renders inadequate. Soyinka's essentialist interpretation of African identities does not account for the different material effects on the cultures. In regards to individual identities and social relations, even the space of valuational ambivalence differs historically and materially. Colonialism in West Africa was less intrusive than in East and Southern Africa with their settler presence, hence the relatively non-violent nature of West African nationalism, reflecting how indirect rule shaped identities of resistance on the continent. Soyinka's relationship to colonial influences is also problematic. Soyinka's use of non-Yoruba influences ignores the level of British colonial intervention in a way it would have been impossible for Hubert Ogunde in the 1940s and 1950s, and for black South African writers in the

¹⁷ Kerr, 14.

¹⁸ Commentators see Soyinka's politics indistinguishable from his metaphysics. See Michael Etherton, *The Development of African Drama*, (London: Hutchinson, 1982), 242. James Booth, *Writers and Politics in Nigeria*, (New York: Africana Publishing Group, 1981), 114.

1930s.¹⁹ This places his works in a Nigerian, rather than an African, post-independence moment.²⁰ Soyinka is influenced also by his Christian upbringing.²¹ The themes of salvation, personal spiritual edification and altruistic sacrifice of the New Testament gospels are identifiable in *Eman* and *Olunde*. Christian motifs are apparent in *Eman*'s death in *The Strong Breed* (1963) and in Segi's father's head being presented to Kongi on a platter in *Kongi's Harvest* (1967). Here, Christian influence serves a creative and catholic function in contradistinction to Christianity occupying an unproblematic position in the works of Fagunwa and Tutuola.²² The moral and spiritual ground remains within his cultural formation of individual identity and within the wider context of cultural complementarity. Ethical objectivism forms the basis around which his identities gain their universal appeal. Christian influence thus weighs strongly in his ideal heroism.

Soyinka's self-apprehensive formulation of the African world and an African identity through Yoruba culture breaks the binary opposition in ideological discourse and centres identity in relationships with one's culture and other cultures. Soyinka locates this identity of the questioning spirit in myth through a reading of the Yoruba pantheon of deities. The interrogation of this strategy is the next part of this section.

¹⁹ Graham Pechey, 'Cultural Struggle and the Narratives of South African Freedom,' in Elleke Boehmer, Laura Chrisman and Kenneth Parker, eds., *Altered State? Writing and South Africa*, (Australia: Dangaroo Press, 1994), 30-1.

²⁰ We see this dramatically in *Opera Wonyosi*, where Nigerian expatriates in Emperor Boky's Central African Republic operate under the oil boom mentality. Although Soyinka criticises Boky's tyranny, it is the immorality of 1970s Nigeria that is the play's major focus.

²¹ Eldred Jones, *The Writing of Wole Soyinka*, (London: Heinemann, 1988), 8-9.

The Concept of an Ideal African Identity in *Myth, Literature and the African World*

Soyinka's interpretation of Yoruba culture as a philosophy of being is elaborated in *Myth, Literature and the African World* (1976).²³ Soyinka determines the roots of African drama as developing from the ritual archetype, which stems from an African communal way of life. This communality informs the individual as a distinct entity, sharing the world with unseen forces that constitute a vital part of consciousness. Time is perceived as cyclical rather than linear, revolving around the living, the unborn and the ancestors.²⁴ Through the Yoruba pantheon of gods, Soyinka compares Yoruba myth against other mythic traditions to reveal the strategic differences that sustain a unique African worldview within a universal humanism. This explication provides a basis for his influential essay, 'The Fourth Stage'.

In 'The Fourth Stage' Soyinka secures the Yoruba concept of identity in the consciousness of will. The spiritual dimension is coeval with the material dimension, as a unitary site of struggle. Yoruba identity comes into existence exemplified through the exploits of Ogun, Yoruba god of iron. Soyinka locates Yoruba tragedy in Ogun's passion play. Ogun's act of completing the Yoruba world by bridging the gap between planes of existence accords him prime status among the deities. According to Yoruba legend the 401 deities were created by the act of a treacherous servant, Atunda, who threw a rock over the original godhead, Orisha-nla, splitting him into pieces. For Soyinka, Ogun's

²² Soyinka's relationship with Christianity itself is ambiguous. Although we see its influence in his work, it makes no impact on his philosophical treatment of African identity. Yet its role and that of Islam in shaping modern Africa, and Soyinka himself, cannot be denied. See Appiah, 111.

²³ All references from the 1995 edition.

²⁴ *Myth*, 10.

personality contains most of Orisa-nla's attributes.²⁵ Ogun's braving the void of disruptions to reunite humans with the gods most represents the Yoruba worldview and thus its will to identity. Tradition has it that Ogun was a hunter who interacted with humans before the other deities. When his fellow deities could not breach the thickets of the primordial marsh Ogun created a machete and cut a way through.²⁶ For this act he was called, "*Osin Imale*" meaning chief among the divinities' (Awolalu, 1979: 81).

In Soyinka's creative oeuvre, Ogun's characteristics are archetypal qualities of his tragic protagonists. In 'Bade Ajuwon's study of the oral tradition of *iremoje*, poetic chants sung at hunter's²⁷ funerals, Ogun's philosophy falls into three sub-divisions. The first is that human beings are essentially alone and so must be self-reliant. Second is exemplary leadership where the ideal person is he who can defend himself and his wards, exhibiting self-control in the process. The third tenet is self-accomplishment and heroism in facing complex problems. Confrontations posed by life must also be met with 'opportunism, vigor, and lust for life' (Ajuwon, 1997: 196). The accomplishments most recognised are those done in the service of others.

Significantly, Soyinka studied ritual forms of dramatic potential through a Rockefeller Fellowship from 1961-2, which serves 'as an archive for his literary imagination' (Quayson, 1997: 162). In Ogun is the individualism that critics ascribe particularly to Soyinka's universal humanism, worked into the communal nature of African society:

²⁵ *Myth*, 31.

²⁶ See Harold Courlander, 'Iron is Received from Ogun,' in *Tales of Yoruba Gods and Heroes*. (New York: Original Publications, 1973), 33-37.

²⁷ Hunters are the archetypal hero figures in Yoruba folklore. Ogun is their patron god. See Abiola Irele, *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology*. (London: Heinemann, 1981), 180.

individualism working for the communal good as the highest manifestation of Ogun's traits and therefore desirable as an ideal Yoruba identity. I will now show how Soyinka uses myth to create an authentic African identity through an interactive engagement with Yoruba history and myth.

Perspectives of Yoruba History and Myth in Soyinka's Identity Formations

Soyinka's rendering of African identities as a potential is exemplified through an elaboration of Ogun's position in Yoruba mythology. Yoruba traditions serve as an ethnic representation of general African identity formation, through which a single idea of African identity can be obtained. Explaining identity as potential allows for multiple modes of behaviour that are influenced through social experience. This is how Soyinka uses Yoruba history, and how this history itself is constructed through purposive reactions to the present.

Yoruba historiography²⁸ aims to complete a unifying enterprise, to create a homogenous Yoruba pan-nationalism. The basis of this pan-nationalism is a flexible notion of history and myth. Partial closure came with the publication of Samuel Johnson's *History of the Yorubas* in 1921 (finished in 1897). It is a partial closure for *History of the Yorubas* is an authoritative reference for historians and dramatists.²⁹ Yoruba history is contextual. Identity is forged out of competing political interests within the sub-groups.³⁰ *History of*

²⁸ Schipper shows the flexibility of history and myth in African oral historiography. Schipper, 83.

²⁹ Ulli Beier states that Duro Ladipo used Johnson's as his source for two plays: *Oba Koso* and *Oba Moro*. Obotunde Ijimere's *Born with the Fire on his Head* also uses Johnson as a source. See Ulli Beier, 'Introduction and Notes,' in *Three Nigerian Plays* (1967; London: Longman, 1970), viii-ix: viii; xiv.

³⁰ Chris Waterman, "'Our Tradition is a Very Modern Tradition': Popular Music and the Construction of Pan-Yoruba Identity," in Karin Barber, ed., *Readings in African Popular Culture*, (Oxford: James Currey, 1997), 49.

the Yorubas was in tune with the ethnographic instincts of Johnson's time³¹ and is the Oyo (as empire) version of Yoruba history. The name 'Yoruba' itself is contested. According to Johnson, the name has Arab origins.³² Another account accords it Hausa roots.³³

William Bascom, writing from the Ife perspective notes that 'The Yoruba do not constitute a "tribe" in a political sense... but there is sufficient underlying cultural and linguistic unity to consider them a single ethnic group, large and diverse as it may be' (Bascom, 1969: 6). The various groups have their own mythic accounts, making a single official history impossible.³⁴ Johnson's account is a point of reference and contention; his linear account, interweaving myth and oral tradition unproblematically, synchronises Yoruba history with colonial history, fixing culture into tradition, making the past the past. Progress is measured in modern terms laid down by the colonising culture out of which Johnson writes. More important, it lays the foundation for the construction of a Yoruba identity as nationality.

Soyinka's investment in Johnson's history is a form of cultural capitalisation, in addition to the literary imaginative links with Fagunwa and Tutuola. He stabilises on one historical text the multiple identities of mythic accounts, which provides cultural continuity.

³¹ Quayson, 162.

³² Samuel Johnson, *History of the Yorubas*, (1921; Nigeria: CMS, 1966), 5.

³³ Waterman, 49.

³⁴ Robin Law, 'The Heritage of Oduduwa: Traditional History and Political Propaganda among the Yoruba,' *Journal of African History* 14.2 (1973), 207-22: 208-9.

A Yoruba perspective is sustained but remains within its colonial historiographical formations. The cultural construction of Yoruba identity is not disengaged from its social and material surroundings. Colonial and nationalist inventions do not disappear after independence. Rather, oral traditions integrate these inventions with local histories. These inventions legitimate their claims on colonialist historiography, which indirect rule facilitated. Conscious of this fact, Soyinka downplays colonial intrusions by taking his culture 'for granted' (Appiah, 1992: 126), by locating African identity in ontological essence, by exposing the 'serious divergences' of difference in a 'recognisable... cast of mind' (Soyinka: 1995: 37). Yet, as Appiah comments, 'In escaping Europe's Africa, the one fiction that Soyinka as theorist cannot escape is that Africans can only take their cultural traditions for granted by an effort of mind' (Appiah, 1992: 126). The fact that Soyinka wrote 'The Fourth Stage' shows that he cannot and does not take his culture for granted. But it also shows that the flexibility of Yoruba culture is not immune to the ambiguity Bhabha identifies in hybrid identities.

Soyinka's recovery of a usable past, one in which a self-defining modernity acts as a vehicle of progress, avoids specificity and strategically ignores colonialism. This explains partly his anti-ideology and why some critics regard him as a nativist.³⁵ But Soyinka cannot avoid contesting Europe's racial myths of Africa. Soyinka's Africa is recovered through the dismantling of the colonial gaze, by toppling the colonials' myths, as Olunde does in *Death and the King's Horseman*. Avoidance is impossible because 'Although the stereotyping initiative... is taken by the community that exercises power, it has to create

a stereotype of itself as much as it does of others' (Deane, 1992: 12). This stereotyping initiative establishes a false rationale during conquest and occupation. Soyinka rejects this notion, destroying its binary formula by exposing the false myths of the colonising power. While some writers challenge colonialism's epistemic violence, Soyinka favours a subtler approach that secures African humanity, thus keeping within the Yoruba literary tradition. This is why for Soyinka the appropriate approach is a reconstruction of indigenous myth where colonial presence is reduced. Situating personal experience in an indigenous construction of tragedy is one of Soyinka's strategies of centralising an African identity in a cultural perspective. This is the next issue I shall address.

Soyinka's Yoruba Concept of Tragedy

'The Fourth Stage' is also where Soyinka formulates the dramatic concept of tragedy within a Yoruba artistic tradition. He makes a comparative study of Western traditions of the concept, mainly through Nietzsche's interpretation of Greek tragedy in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872).

Soyinka seeks the originality of Yoruba tragedy in the Aristotelian concept of catharsis, that inner sigh of therapeutic relief derived from expiation of fear and pity. Catharsis in Yoruba tragedy represents healing the fractures between the pluralities of existence that form the holistic world. The fractures are a constant reminder of the original act of will by Ogun in uniting humans with the universe, those unseen forces from which they were detached and which provoke terror and uncertainty. Ogun's act in braving the

³⁵ Edward Said, 'Yeats and Decolonization,' in Seamus Deane, ed., *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature*, (U.S.A.: U of Minnesota P, 1992), 69-95: 82. Isidore Okpewho, 'Soyinka, Euripides and the Anxiety of Empire' in *Research in*

interminable stretch of chaos provides the Yoruba with their perception of immortality, turning pessimism into resolve. Where there was linear despair there is now cyclical regeneration of pre-birth, human existence and afterlife (though there is still the space of aberration, typified by the *abiku* phenomenon). Where the Yoruba perception of identity comes into being is in recognising the human role in the cycle.³⁶

Crossing the sphere is no ordinary journey but one fraught with unimaginable danger. It is a rite of passage found in the liminal sphere, a term originated from Arnold van Gennep and popularised by Victor Turner. The liminal phase is:

in milieu detached from mundane life and characterised by the presence of ambiguous ideas, monstrous images, sacred symbols, ordeals, humiliations, esoteric and paradoxical instructions, the emergence of “symbolic types” represented by maskers and clowns, gender reversals, anonymity, and many other phenomena... (Turner, 1998: 64)

Turner describes this area as a no-man’s land, a place situated betwixt-and-between past, present and future time. Soyinka dramatises this void in *The Road* (1965), when Murano is trapped inside the dead masquerade’s costume. Elesin Oba blames his failure to commit ritual suicide on his inability to cross this void. Ben Okri’s protagonist, Azaro, in *The Famished Road* (1991) trilogy is constantly in flux between spirit and earthly realms, in a liminal stretch that is in an agonistic relationship with both worlds. In Turner’s formulation changes are climacterical, the cathartic function absorbs the excess energy of the individual and returns society to a state of equilibrium. This state of equilibrium is not simply a return to an original state but an accommodation of growth of its members who

have gone through an irreversible process, 'a gestation process, a fetation of modes appropriate to and anticipating postliminal existence' (Turner, 1998: 65). This is the social function of the tragic idea in Soyinka's drama.³⁷ For societal gain there can be no return to a previous state for a community if it expects a surplus, where especially that society holds flexible notions of progress as the Yoruba.

For Soyinka, the belief of a fatalistic acceptance of tragedy by the Yoruba is erroneous. Although 'the past is not a mystery' and 'the future (the unborn) is yet unknown, it is not a mystery to the Yoruba but co-existent in present consciousness'. Yoruba tragedy emerges from the gulf of transition, 'through the agency of will. It is this experience that the modern tragic dramatist recreates through the medium of physical contemporary action, reflecting the emotions of the first active battle of the will through the abyss of dissolution' (Soyinka, 1995: 149). Ogun, for Soyinka, is the 'first tragic actor in that battle and Yoruba tragic drama is the re-enactment of the cosmic conflict' (Soyinka, 1995: 149-150). Yoruba identity comes into being through resolution and harmony after the conflict.

Soyinka's appropriation of Ogun has caused some critics to perceive this strategy as in danger of becoming a 'monotonous critical manoeuvre' (Quayson, 1997: 66). Apart from this:

³⁶ Soyinka: 1995: 144.

³⁷ See Ketu H. Katrak, *Wole Soyinka and Modern Tragedy: A Study of Dramatic Theory and Practice*, (U.S.A.: Greenwood Press, 1986), 33.

it also prevents the identification of the varying attitudes that the plays have towards the indigenous resource-base. The unmediated Ogun symmetry that is seen to inhere in all the tragic characters undermines any attempt to trace the various alterations to the Ogun ideal, which, taken together, depict a continual process of growth, contradiction and elaboration in Soyinka's work' (Quayson, 1997: 66).

Femi Osofisan also identifies a limitation in Soyinka's use of Ogun. Osofisan adopts Orunmila, the *Ifa* (oracle) divinity as his dramatic 'metaphor'. Orunmila is Olorun's deputy in matters of 'wisdom, prognostication and foreknowledge' (Awolalu, 1979: 79). Osofisan sees Soyinka's unmediated adoption of Ogun as harbouring reactionary tendencies because it makes little or no response to contemporary society's problems in the global economic field. Instead Soyinka presents 'the traditional Yoruba world untransmuted' (Osofisan, 1982: 78). Soyinka's identities, fixed within a moral boundary, fail to respond to changing social problems. They are absolute in their moral certainty and fail to address the specifics of their situation in ways that move society forward. Hence an individual like Eman ends up at odds with society but in no way furthers its' cultural material progress.

Soyinka's favouring of the lone idealist is fundamental to his understanding of tragedy in its Yoruba manifestation. It is the key to his formulation of a unique identity. But is his idiosyncratic interpretation of Yoruba culture a hindrance to the flexible and accommodating nature, which he claims as inherently Yoruba? This is the subject of my study of his play, *The Strong Breed*.

Tragic Identity in *The Strong Breed*

In *The Strong Breed* (1963),³⁸ the main protagonist, Eman, is forced to confront his hereditary calling as a 'carrier', a function that involves a local representative metaphorically bearing the evils of the past year away from their community in an act of ritual cleansing. Rejecting this role, Eman runs away from his hometown to live in another community where he is regarded as a stranger. This community has its own carrier tradition. Either a non-indigene or a gift of the gods³⁹ performs the role. As a result all non-indigenes depart from the community during the ritual period. Eman, the village's teacher and doctor, chooses to remain despite the warnings by Sunma, his assistant and the daughter of Jaguna, a village patriarch, that the village is unwelcome to strangers during the cleansing period. Eman challenges the community's authorities when they prepare a helpless mute as the carrier. He takes his place, escapes the initiation and dies in the process.

Eman as a figure of resistance opposes the patriarchs on two fronts: as a person with knowledge of a carrier tradition, and as a humanist. Both stem from his confrontation with the carrier tradition. He has undergone partial preparation as a carrier and has wilfully rejected its corruption by his teacher. He has also made a conscious decision not to inherit his father's role in order to lead his own life. Eman's humanist position

³⁸ All references to the 1984 edition.

³⁹ Obatala, the Yoruba god of creation moulded the image of earth and humans and is responsible for the variations in human physiognomy and also for deformities. Albinos and hunchbacks are therefore regarded as being dedicated to him. Soyinka's Obatala is passive, devoid of revolutionary tendencies (Myth, 1995: 151ff). Noureini Tidjani-Serpos offers a contrary view, empowering Obatala with the revolutionary instinct. See Noureini Tidjani-Serpos, 'The Postcolonial Condition: The Archeology of African Knowledge: From the Feat of Ogun and Sango to the Postcolonial Creativity of Obatala,' in *Research in African Literatures* 27.1 (1996), 3-18: 11. Soyinka's reading of Obatala's deviation is as a palmwine-induced mishap for which he is deeply remorseful (Myth, 159). Ifada as a godsend reflects his interpretation of Obatala as saintly god, given to suffering. For a dramatic representation of this suffering, see Obotunde Ijimere, *The Imprisonment of Obatala and other Plays*, (London: Heinemann, 1966).

emanates from this conscious decision. He has no agenda other than to be himself. His defence of Ifada fits Soyinka's ideal of African identities being shaped by action. There is no premeditation, no prevarication on his part. Eman acts on supererogation, falling within the Ogun symmetry of the self-willed entity.

Eman fulfils the requirement of Soyinka's ideal hero as individual but he does not meet up with the expectations of the social hero. If his deeds are to free culture from tradition and place it as a dynamic force related to the progress of society, he fails. Eman's action problematises the carrier tradition and we are left to believe that a change will occur because of this and not through communal consent. In the final scene Jaguna and Oroge dwell on the evening's events with only the silence of the villagers in response.

Indirectly, Soyinka's dialectic of leadership is brought to bear. The question of good leadership is one that Soyinka comments regularly on. In *The Strong Breed*, the people do not voice their concerns. It is as if they expect the patriarchs to automatically adopt a benevolent attitude to not just the carrier tradition, but to the strangers they turn out of the village during the ritual. The power relations exposed by this traumatising event remain unquestioned. Rather than born of the villagers' indignation, change is proposed through their silence. Once the resisting hero dies, the resistance dies with him. Soyinka does not place power of resistance in the 'people', unlike Fanon.⁴⁰

In pre-colonial African dramatic practices, and in Soyinka's own intervention in politics, action comes with noisy proclamation as opposition to hegemonic oppression.⁴¹ Eman's

⁴⁰ Lazarus comments that Fanon gives the masses a revolutionary character that they do not possess. Lazarus, 14-5.

⁴¹ Kerr, 49; Nkashama, 177.

action remains resolutely idealistic; he carries no one along with him; it is a one-off.

Eman conforms to Soyinka's heroes of special qualities, being born a carrier. *The Strong Breed* is about a clash of cultures, complicated by one man's desire to be free from one tradition, which is corrupted and the other, which is too rigid. It is also about the individual in conflict with the community. Eman creates a new identity in the modern world, as a stranger.⁴² His desire to create a space for himself is so strong that he cannot perceive the darkening mood surrounding the village in preparation for the rites. Eman's wilful alienation gives him the voice of resistance. The culturally founded fears of the villagers make little impression on Eman the stranger. He shows no fear of approaching Girl, the diseased outcast.⁴³ Sunma, hinting at the danger of not leaving the village at this time of the year also exposes the ethnic chauvinism used to control the indigenes.⁴⁴ Oroge's comment, that 'no carrier may return to the village' cements the attitude of the townspeople to outsiders. The alienated individual is exactly the identity that Eman has fashioned for himself.

The village is unaffected by the macro-social integration of the nation-state. It is a self-contained community that is yet to enter the elitist reconstruction of African cultural unity and of nationalist discourse. The village remains fixed in the colonial narrative of difference that facilitated indirect rule.⁴⁵ The strangers who flee the village during the carrier period adopt the same attitude. They are unable or unwilling to claim citizenship rights: the rights of ethnicity and tradition supersede any claims of their contributions to the community. Individuality and ethnicity remain tied to the discourse of difference, of

⁴² *TSB*, 123.

⁴³ *TSB*, 119.

tribal affiliation. Soyinka deals with the unpreparedness for the transfer of ethnic loyalties to a national identity in *A Dance of the Forests* (1960). The Gathering of the Tribes around the totem is a facile celebration that will unravel due to its shallowness. Through myth and ritual Soyinka analyses the 'national longing for form' (Rushdie, 1981: 300) and what happens when entrenched interests prohibit the growth of culture by incorporating new experience.

The case is different in *The Strong Breed*. Eman and the patriarchs both exhibit intransigence. Eman does not contest the important and highly visible confrontation between ethnic and national identities. That non-indigenes have vacated the village bears little impression on Eman the individualist. Their absconding from the village magnifies Eman's refusal to leave as exceptionally courageous. But it is not a political stand, rather it is the act of an egoistic man seeking his own space in opposition to communal law, and by the way, sowing seeds of doubt in the people's minds.

Eman's attitude to the villagers supports this observation. He is dismissive of Sunma's fears. He is ignorant of what Girl represents in the community. He does good for the community on his own terms, much in the same way Mda accuses South African liberals in their attitude towards the rural people. What we see in him is arrogance born out of a modernity, based on the Western notion of liberal humanism. Eman essentialises what is right and wrong and rigidly applies it in his conflict with the patriarchs. This in itself is an ideology. Eman does not attempt to redefine the carrier tradition. Like Okonkwo in

⁴⁴ *TSB*, 123.

⁴⁵ *Isichei*, 392.

Things Fall Apart, Eman acts unilaterally, without thinking of the consequences to everyone else around him. While Okonkwo believes he is working within the warrior ethics of his community, consultation has always been its better part, to ensure that Umuofia does not embark on a '*fight of blame*' (Achebe, 2001: 10). Consultation is in keeping with the social ethic of the individual in a community.

While the carrier traditions differ, they are given an Afrocentric similarity as an affirmation of African cultural unity. Cultural similarity allows Eman to respond to Jaguna's belligerence with his own local interpretation of the carrier tradition before rounding up with a universal humanistic jibe: 'A village which cannot produce its own carrier contains no men' (*TSB*, 129). Eman's retort is defined by his village's own carrier tradition and as a response to his own preferred status as a man freed from his own culture. Eman's freedom cannot be expressed without being ideologically tinted by the culture, for it is part of his own project in locating a universal humanism in a specifically African frame of mind. Otherwise, Soyinka's authentic African identity simply apes Western humanism. And so Eman is a carrier by birth and it is a fact he cannot escape. He tells Sunma, 'Renouncing oneself is not so easy' (*TSB*, 123). And when Sunma accuses him of inhumanity, he responds, 'I don't know what that means, but I am very much my father's son' (*TSB*, 126). Eman cannot act in isolation of social mores.

By linking an essential African identity with heredity, the social power of Eman's act is further reduced to an episode in the village's history. Eman becomes an ethnic chauvinist like Jaguna. Rather than provide a social vision, Eman's act closes a chapter on an

anomaly.⁴⁶ In Victor Turner's account of the liminal phase, society registers a successful ritual attempt before returning to a state of equilibrium, accommodating the excess of the ritual performer. The changes are added to the communal experience and accounts for growth. But Eman accepted his status as a stranger and steps in only at a critical moment. By contesting the role of carrier, he ends up complying with the convention of the stranger as carrier.⁴⁷ The problem of ethnic and national identities is never resolved. In death as in life Eman remains an outsider.

Eman's self-determination is the source of conflict in the play. He rushes headlong into the destiny he tries desperately to avoid. The curse of the carrier prevents him from forming a meaningful relationship with women and leads to his peripatetic and isolationist tendencies. Though Soyinka wants to show an African identity as a potential Eman is very much fixed ontologically. The play's ending is ambiguous, for the village, like Eman, has not made the full journey across the liminal void. The rupture is not healed; society is left stranded. Whether he is a hero to the villagers is doubtful. As such, the new experience they incorporate is ambiguous, like the half-child in *Dance*. On the issue of the hero as a social hero in African literary representations, Masizi Kunene explains:

It is clear then, that literature in the African context describes man first and foremost, as a social hero. Not only is he at the centre of things as an individual, he is also representative of a social order. This may account for the high authority accorded to the fundamental social principles that must guide society if it is to retain its communal (collective) structure. As an individual, man's heroism is

⁴⁶ Ngugi sees Soyinka's moral heroes as having limited impact on their societies. See Ngugi, 65-6.

⁴⁷ Andrew Gurr senses a fatality bred out of acceptance in Soyinka's tragic plays. See Andrew Gurr 'Third World Drama: Soyinka and Tragedy,' in *Nairobi* 2.2 (1974), 13-20: 18. In this, tragic figures like Eman resemble Soyinka's interpretation of Obatala rather than Ogun.

viewed as anti-social, for any act carried out for self-glorification is a threat to the solidarity of society. If the hero must comment on his heroic acts, it must be within the context of an ordinary person, not as a superman, who has approximated the social ideal. The narration of an individual's heroic acts must lead to an awareness of the heroism of others, both past and present. Society confirms its approval through acclamation. (Kunene, 1980: 200)

In fighting for change Eman appropriates the meaning of the social ideal because he refuses to accept the existing order. Conflict arises from the differing conceptions of the carrier, neither of which is heroic. Eman's singular act gives the role heroic status but not in Kunene's conception of African heroism. Eman's heroism lends the carrier function a sense of humanity by emptying its traditionalism, which the custodians force upon it. The role's interpretation is therefore its bar on inclusiveness and to open the invented closure, Eman must confront the community.⁴⁸ The position of the hero/protagonist in African literature as a whole is problematised,⁴⁹ especially when the literary tradition is influenced heavily by the Western literary tradition and its representation of individuality and its connotations of Western humanism. This affects Soyinka's representation of African identities as a potential through Eman.

The villagers fail to curse Eman as tradition requires. The social consequences of the unsuccessful ritual are uppermost on their minds. Soyinka hints at the dangers of inflexibility that prohibit external influence. It inhibits the growth and variety that new experience brings. By locating Eman within the Ogun ideal and universal humanism, a conflict arises between individual and group identities and how ideology inhibits growth.

⁴⁸ 'Negation' is the term used by Stewart Crehan to describe Soyinka's strategy in contesting cultural dogmatism. See Stewart Crehan, 'The Spirit of Negation in the Works of Wole Soyinka,' in *Research in African Literatures* 21.4 (1990), 15-31. Soyinka describes his attitude as that of self-apprehension rather than negation.

But Eman himself is part of the problem for he too is locked within an essential identity that, try as he might, he is unable to escape.

In the next section, I aim to look at how Zakes Mda's dramatic theory has been shaped by the two dominant ideologies of the 1970s: apartheid and Black Consciousness. These ideologies shaped race relations as violently oppositional. I look at how Mda's theories forwarded Black Consciousness in its theatrical representation, by looking at issues it did not immediately address. In this regard, I will study how Mda uses labour migration to complete Black Consciousness.

Zakes Mda and Township Theatre of the 1970s

Zakes Mda's most productive period coincides with a defining moment in South Africa's political history. The 1970s heralded two conflagrations in race relations, which led to a heightened confrontational approach by black South Africans that gained organisational and ideological impetus. The first was after the so-called 'decade of peace' (1963-1973), when economic downturn led to workers' strikes organised at the local level. Their demands were met, giving unions recognition among black workers to represent their interests.⁵⁰ The momentum of the strike action in Durban, known as 'Durban 1973' (Mamdani, 1996: 234) crystallised disparate groups around the slogan '*asinamali*' – 'the absence of money' – to expose the workers' poor conditions. This was followed by the 1976 Soweto uprisings in which students instigated action against the social conditions of

⁴⁹ Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* confirms Kunene's view. Okonkwo represents excessiveness in Igbo individuality. In a blind effort to distance himself from his father, he transgresses the boundaries of social behaviour. Ayi Kwei Armah also fields social heroism in changing attitudes in *The Healers*, (U.K.: Heinemann, 1979), 6.

⁵⁰ Worden, 118. For a study of the workers movement that grew from the Durban strikes in 1973, see Mamdani, 233-238.

township blacks. Mda combines elements of various dramatic forms dominant during this period: township musical, protest theatre and resistance theatre, to create his own unique style, which he expatiates in his own theoretical outlook on the functions of theatre.

The township musical was the most popular theatre form, of which Gibson Kente was the leading exponent. Along with other practitioners such as Sam Mhangwane and Boykie Mohlamme, Kente's productions were commercial and non-political, dealing with issues familiar to the township audience. Kente's drama incorporated political themes after the success of Athol Fugard's *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* (1972). Fugard's play proved that political themes could attract audiences. Kente's audiences were becoming politically informed and 'were no longer satisfied with the simple representation of their experience; they wanted an exposure of political and economic systems that produced their condition and a suggestion of what they were to do about it' (Coplan, 1985: 210-11). Between 1974 and 1976, Kente produced the political melodramas, *How Long, I Believe* and *Too Late*.

The theatre of the 1970s reflected the growing social unrest and the resolve of blacks to determine their position in South Africa. This led to proactive approaches against apartheid. Plays of this period featured mainly the heroics and consciousness-raising of workers, because of their success as agents of change in organised groups, although labour unions were not an unproblematic phenomenon. Mamdani shows how fragmented the workers unions were according to interests and differences over strategies to improve conditions. Mamdani divides the contending factors into two camps: the workerist, fighting mainly for worker's interests, and the populist camp, which engaged with

political and social issues.⁵¹ Black Consciousness plays such as Matsemela Manaka's *Egoli* (1979) and Maishe Maponya's *The Hungry Earth* (1978) addressed these disparate positions of workers either in the hostel or in the workplace.

Creating an aesthetic around the growing political awareness of black South Africans emphasised using culture as a political weapon. The effect was not only to address black South Africans about their situation and how to oppose oppression collectively. It was also about creating community by dramatising particular interests and responses to their situation, a common ground around which disparate ethnicities and classes could crystallise. It was a negation of the divisive response of colonialism, segregation and apartheid. By using art as a political weapon, we see Kelwyn Sole's argument against the 'notion that cultural creativity is a spontaneous rather than an organised, process' (Sole, 1994: 2). Sole further argues that 'cultural creativity – in its most self-conscious form, as art – is necessarily implicated in processes of political and ideological contestation and power' (Sole, 1994: 3). Sole traces the development of black theatre from protest to resistance and the underlying hegemony underpinning it: the apartheid government's shift from race superiority to the 'separate but equal' policy. The growing political awareness and the need to contest segregation not only between races, but also within black ethnicities substantiates black theatre's political form. It identifies racist policies such as separate development not as benign policies for black self-rule but as exploitative practices. Before I locate Mda's theory in the theatre of the mid-1970s and onwards, I will identify the fragmenting processes that black South African theatre of the period sought to counter.

⁵¹ Mamdani, 236-238.

Apartheid and Identity Formations among Black South Africans

Developed out of the system of segregation of the early 20th century, apartheid was unique in that it was a philosophy of Afrikaner ascendancy. Unlike apartheid, segregation was not simply imposed from above:

The shape it took was considerably influenced by the initiatives and responses of people in the often forgotten rural areas where over 80 per cent of Africans continued to live until the 1930s. Attempts by a rurally based African population to defend their old ways of life were not segregation in the sense that whites understood the term. But these could be compatible with elements of segregation in certain respects – as an expression of their own separate African identity, as a means to retain some control over their residual land, or as an expression of popular support for chiefs. (Beinart and Dubow, 1995: 9-10)

Active engagement with indirect rule was a means of protecting interests in the spheres of decentralised power. Labour migration had yet to affect black South African urban and rural relations as in the later years of rapid mining and manufacturing growth.

Apartheid sought not only to create distinctions between races, but also between ethnic groups among indigenous Africans. The Afrikaner ascendancy, politically empowered by the election of the National Party to office in 1948 enforced segregation in all parts of society. Central to this agenda, ‘Afrikaner ethnic exclusivity was a distinctive aspect of apartheid’ (Beinart and Dubow, 1995: 12).

In addition to the numerous laws controlling association and movement of people, culture was employed in entrenching Afrikaner hegemony. Apartheid was not only a system of entrenching economic disparity between races, it was also an attempt at rewriting history,

directing consciousness and inventing identities. The 1952 Jan van Riebeeck

Tercentenary aimed at legitimising Afrikaner claims as civilisers of South Africa and:

settler nationalism asserting ideological and political control over blacks at a time of emerging resistance to white rule... In response the South African state began to ban people and organisations and to propagate its own image of the nation on a massive public scale. (Rasool and Witz, 1993: 449)⁵²

From segregation to apartheid, the lessons of British indirect rule were intensified through law. Legislation such as the 1913 Natives' Land Act and the 1936 Native Trust and Land Bill set boundaries for the reserves that later became the Bantustans established by the 1953 Bantu Authorities Act. According to Tom Lodge:

As this policy was established in the 1950s, wealth and power became concentrated at the local level around compliant chiefs and their acolytes. Their political aspirations, together with those of the small group of government employees (teachers, clerical workers, agricultural demonstrators and so forth) would be met through the construction of quasi-independent administrations of each reserve or group of reserves. By the end of the period the main function of the reserves would be in the displacement of sociopolitical tensions from the towns to the countryside where they could be more ruthlessly controlled and constituted less of a threat. (Lodge, 1984: 263)

Coercion was a regular feature in the reserves to assert the authority of invented chiefs, due to the resistance of their rural subjects. Lodge cites instances of rebellion against Native Authority. These included outright rejection of Bantu authority and the Bantu

⁵² See also, Loren Kruger, 'The Premodern Postcolonial? The Drama of the Autochthonous Settler,' in Helen Gilbert, ed., *(Post)Colonial Stages: Critical and Creative Views on Drama, Theatre and Performance*, (U.K.: Dangaroo Press, 1999). Nhlanhla Maake, 'Inscribing Identity on the Landscape: National Symbols in South Africa,' in Kate Darian-Smith, Liz Gunner and Sarah Nuttall, eds., *Text, Theory, Space*, (London: Routledge, 1995).

chiefs, protests at the deterioration of local education because of the Bantu Education Act (1953), and objection to interference with traditional polygamy arrangements.⁵³

The capitalist exploitative nature of apartheid directed government policy. The reserves acted as a reservoir of labour and a place of control. They evolved from this original design to correct the contradictions in the South African economy where pre-capitalist and capitalist modes existed side by side, both competing effectively in the markets.⁵⁴

The Native Land Act of 1913 is seen by Wolpe⁵⁵ and Lodge⁵⁶ as not solely a law motivated by racial segregation but by the necessity to protect black land from white farmers so as to provide labourers with land for subsistence farming in the reservations. This strategy justified paying below-subsistence wages to black workers and entrenching their migrant status in the urban areas. The reserves would be their 'homeland' to which they would be attached through family and land ownership. Pass laws and labour bureaux controlled labour movement between the competing interests of agriculture, mining and manufacturing. The state was a tool for the settler minority to break black self-reliance and competition. Timothy Keegan notes that though the tensions also involved the threat of large industrial concerns to smaller settler agriculture competitiveness, black farmers and their dependants bore the impact of legislation that favoured white interests. As Keegan comments, 'a major element in the viability of white agriculture was the success

⁵³ Tom Lodge, *Black Politics in South Africa Since 1945*, (U.K.: Longman, 1984), 261-294.

⁵⁴ Harold Wolpe, 'Capitalism and Cheap Labour Power in South Africa,' in William Beinart and Saul Dubow, eds., *Segregation and Apartheid in Twentieth Century South Africa*, (London: Routledge, 1995), 60-90: 67-8.

⁵⁵ Wolpe, 71-2.

⁵⁶ Lodge, 261.

of the white farmers in wrenching control, through the auspices of the state' (Keegan, 1986: 215).

The growing racial discrimination impacted on South African literature, involving a move from assimilationist to segregationist themes. Graham Pechey notes that this shift corresponded with the waning influence of the liberals in social affairs after 1936. For the black middle class, who had hitherto believed assimilation was achievable, the question of its possibility was becoming bleak. 'How do you write a novel when the sociopolitical genre you and your people are being written into looks more like a new and hybrid version of racial romance?' (Pechey, 1986: 30-1)

Migration Patterns: The Rural-Urban Influence in Identity Formations

Apartheid secured a semblance of control over black movement. By encouraging division through the Bantustan policy apartheid also created a divide between rural and urban blacks. To endure the harsh economic environment, black South Africans adopted a number of survival strategies, which changed social relations and affected identity formations. The power of chiefs magnified in the homelands through Native Administration. Migrant labourers made their families wards of chiefs, further adding to chiefly authority. Distinctions between township residents and the mainly migrant hostel dwellers increased, as did the distinctions between ethnic groups through homeboy networks. The migratory nature of labourers meant that effectively their interests, however inconsiderable, resided in the rural areas: 'Inasmuch as a customary right was

understood, claimed, and defended as a tribal right, notions of the customary overlapped with and reinforced an ethnic identity' (Mamdani, 1996: 219-20).

For Mamdani, the distinctions between the rural and the urban are complex but they can be viewed through the bifurcated state engendered by indirect rule. The South African state enforced two types of society: civil society governed by rule of law, and Native Authority, governed by customary law, which came to be 'all-encompassing' and 'backed up by the armed might of the central state' (Mamdani, 1996: 286). Mamdani traces the two major tensions emanating from indirect rule or 'decentralized customary despotism'... 'interethnic in the Native Authority and urban-rural in civil society' (Mamdani, 1996: 219). The system was entrenched as a survival strategy to the extent it was replicated in the workers' hostels.⁵⁷ By showing how these forces are applied, Mamdani highlights the strategies of survival by migrant workers and how these strategies shape identities in the rural and urban areas. Mamdani shows that these identities, along with inter-ethnic identities, rather than being radically distinct, influenced one another.

Still, attempts to unite blacks politically met with resistance when the interests of one group conflicted with those of another. An example is the different interests between the mainly migrant hostel dwellers and township residents. In this case, political ideologies failed to recognise the cultural differences, which were the lived experiences of various black groups living together. Political ideologies sprang from urban and exiled groups. Neither of them took account of the rural-urban link, which was an integral part of the

migrant experience, as Mamdani has traced. In the 1970s, educated township youths began to play a greater role in fighting oppression in the community. They found an ideological home in Black Consciousness.

Black Consciousness

The Black Consciousness Movement articulated the dominant ideology among young black intellectuals during Mda's productive period of the 1970s-80s. The movement was influenced by the African American civil rights movement in the United States, especially the position adopted by the black power movement of the mid-1960s.

Cleveland Sellers expatiates:

... What is Black Consciousness? More than anything else, it is an attitude, a way of seeing the world. Those of us who possess it were involved in a perpetual search for racial meanings... the construction of a new, black value system geared towards the unique cultural and political experience of blacks in this country.

Black Consciousness signalled the end of the use of the word Negro... Black Consciousness permitted us to relate our struggle to the one being waged by third-world revolutionaries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. It helped us understand the imperialistic aspects of domestic racism. It helped us understand that the problems of this nation's oppressed minorities will not be solved without revolution. (Sellers: 1973: 279)

Robert Kavanagh defines the Black Consciousness Movement in its South African manifestation:

The Black Consciousness Movement, though it developed in the nationalist tradition of black political struggle in South Africa, gave emphasis to racial/cultural factors and to the common interest of all blacks, i.e. black Africans, 'Coloureds', and 'Indians'. The movement attempted to use its theory to explain

⁵⁷ Mamdani, 280-1.

and expose to blacks all areas where their racial/cultural interests were threatened or damaged by the activities of the dominant white groups and their ‘agents’ among blacks. This led to the first systematic delineation of ‘black’ viewpoints and ‘correct’ black attitudes to the entire gamut of black-white relations and black affairs - to the white government, to the white liberals, to religion, to Bantu education, to bantustans and bantustan leaders, to the press, the radio, music, art and literature. (Kavanagh, 1985: 145-6)

Although Black Consciousness was a way of relating to the world, unlike Negritude its main premise was not based on values that were ‘essentially formed by intuitive reason’ (Senghor, 1998: 440). For African Americans, although Black Consciousness involved ‘a perpetual search for racial meanings,’ it was a response to the material conditions of inequality in America and linking them to revolutionary exercises abroad. South African Black Consciousness was also a ‘systematic delineation of “black viewpoints” and “correct black attitudes”’ in relation to white domination, but it also defined ‘black’ in class terms, including all non-whites. The link between African Americans and the African experience of oppression was forged by the similarity of their material conditions. According to Ntongela Masilela:

The placement of the intellectual bridge of trans-Atlanticism across the vast ocean between Africa and the African diaspora was not because of racial ontologies or the myth of the search for origins, but rather because of political solidarity, intellectual affiliations, cultural retainments, and historical appropriations. (Masilela, 1996: 90)

The Black Power movement, from which Black Consciousness emanated, was partially a mix of Garveyite revivalism and the current influence of Malcolm X during the early to

mid-1960s.⁵⁸ Both ideologies called for racial separatism and for black self-help. Vital to both strands of Black Consciousness was the primacy of race oppression.

South African Black Consciousness was influenced not only by the African American movement but also by Negritude, Kwame Nkrumah, Tanzanian African socialism, Paulo Freire, Frantz Fanon and the liberation movement in Mozambique and Angola among others. The main organisation responsible for its propagation was the South African Student's Organisation (SASO) and its main figure, Steve Biko.⁵⁹ A fundamental part of its manifesto was for the black man to 'build up his own value systems, see himself as self-defined and not defined by others' (Kavanagh, 1985: 147).⁶⁰ Similar to the movement in America was the idea of establishing a new mentality by raising social awareness of the whole group. To this effect, the term 'black' identified all oppressed groups rather than a colour group.⁶¹ The policy of SASO, similar to the groups formed around Black Power in America, was to disengage itself from white association. SASO itself was a breakaway group from the white-dominated liberal National Union of South African Students (NUSAS). White liberals were perceived as inhibiting factors to full racial pride.

⁵⁸ George M. Fredrickson, *The Comparative Imagination: On the History of Racism, Nationalism, and Social Movements*, (London: U of California P, 1997), 190.

⁵⁹ For a study of the student's movement and its related activities with Black Consciousness, see Robert Kavanagh, *Theatre and Cultural Struggle in South Africa*, (London: Zed Books, 1985), 145-195.

⁶⁰ Steve Biko emphasised the importance of self-identity to Black Consciousness, citing that other groups had become authorities on African people and culture. He realised the need for the deliberate raising of a unique African perspective among Africans and that it was not an ontological given. 'In my opinion it is not necessary to talk with Africans about African culture. However, in the light of the above statements I realise that there is so much confusion sown, not only amongst casual non-African readers, but even amongst Africans themselves, that perhaps a sincere attempt should be made at emphasising the authentic cultural aspects of the African people by Africans themselves' Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like* (1978; London: Heinemann, 1987), 40.

⁶¹ Kavanagh, 160.

Although Biko downplayed the influences of the African American initiative,⁶² as we have seen, similarities abound in their outlook. SASO's call for race separatism echoed the Black Power movement's call. Prior to 1963, in America, groups like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Committee on Racial Equality (CORE) had espoused racial inclusion. By 1965, the feeling in both organisations was that 'the presence of whites in the movement was inhibiting the growth of black pride and initiative' (Fredrickson, 1997: 190). Biko, like Stokely Carmichael in America, urged sympathetic whites to educate their own people on race matters rather than lecture blacks on their predicament. As long as they benefited from the apartheid regime because of skin colour, their contribution would compromise the liberation movement. Whites were perceived as unable to fully commit themselves to change a system under which they benefited. David Kerr in examining the contribution of white liberals to black theatre concludes:

The heavy-handed legislative machinery mainly reflected the racist ideology of the Boer political hegemony. The "English" component in the South African white ruling classes tended to project a "liberal" approach to race relations; but, in fact, the economic control of black entertainment by the white liberal establishment was probably more effective than racist legislation in stunting a critical black theatre. (Kerr, 1997: 216)

Indeed, black theatre thrived under increasing segregation. Segregation assisted in creating a commercially viable township musical business for Gibson Kente and for the incorporation of politics into his theatre. Separatism also gave impetus to developing the new attitude of township theatre practitioners in the move from protest to resistance,

⁶² Biko, 70.

supporting Sole's argument that art is 'necessarily implicated in processes of political and ideological contestation of power'.

Mda and Black Consciousness Theatre

Inasmuch as Mda's creative and theoretical works are part of the black theatre movement which crystallised in the seventies, there is no mistaking the many ways in which his work goes against the grain of the performance traditions and politics of the same movement. (Peterson, 1993: vii)

Peterson's observation identifies Mda's position as a township playwright whose distinctiveness needs to be asserted. This is despite the fact Mda himself states that 'As with most artists of my generation, the historical developments in South Africa, including the June '76 resistance, have had a great impact on my work' (Mda, 1984: 296). Mda asserts this fact because of his unique position as a dramatist of this period: 'Although writing thousands of miles from the country, the characters and situations I depict in my drama continue to be motivated by social, political, economic and historical factors in South Africa' (Mda, 1984: 296). Mda's unique position of exile in Lesotho, a nation land-locked within South Africa, is a major reference point that gains significance after we understand the nature of black theatre as resistance theatre.

The early work of this period was known as theatre of protest, while the work that was influenced by Black Consciousness came to be known as the theatre for resistance. Loren Kruger distinguishes between the two forms:

Resistance theatre may be distinguished from protest theatre by its stress on the representation or, at least, assertion of defiance over and above the portrayal of suffering. In the long view, however, they share a thematic emphasis on bearing witness to the brutality of apartheid and the effects of state violence not only on the social and political aspirations but also on the bodies, voices, and dreams of the majority of South Africans. Its distinguishing features have been the dramatization of racial and class conflict generally involving African workers, usually men, a repertory of performance techniques derived in varying measure from agit-prop, Brechtian distancing, Grotowskian poor theatre, the improvisation and testimony of the workshop format and practices of popular township theatre, a mixture of musical and the domestic melodrama, often including comic skits and dance numbers not immediately connected to the plot or political point of the drama. It has generally shunned the idea of “traditional” performances, in large part because these have been historically associated with the enforced tribalism that was the cornerstone of apartheid cultural policy. The best of South African theatre, according to this model, has been characterized by the vivid representation of the political struggle against apartheid and tribalism and for liberation and modernity. (Kruger, 1996: 132)

Kruger’s comprehensive definition of resistance theatre informs us of the political nature of township theatre and its emphasis on addressing a black audience. The theatre was male-centred, focusing on workers who had been prominent in organising resistance at the local level. Township theatre concentrated on urban conditions, viewing the rural areas as sites of ethnic particularity and thus part of the state’s hegemonic scheme. Where in West African drama, the homogeneous rural area represents authenticity, to the township black South Africans it represented a construct of oppression. Indirect rule in British West Africa, with its false autonomy, allowed Africans to determine their local histories. Johnson’s *History of the Yorubas* is a manifestation of this determination. In South Africa, the bantustans were first and foremost reservoirs of labour and areas of control.

Through the artistic portrayal of the effects of apartheid and its rejection, township theatre sought to create an identity of resistance. The identity of resistance is shaped by the desire of an oppressed group to reject their oppressive condition. David Coplan, referring to Mda and his contemporaries, Matsemala Manaka and Maishe Maponya states this desire of the township audience:

Emerging directly from the townships, these dramatists understand that for African playgoers, theatre is not a matter of creating an illusion, suspending disbelief, or identifying with metaphoric representations of experience. The working-class aesthetic of the township is that theatre is a direct extension of the actual conditions of black existence, with no necessary boundaries between art and life, performer and audience. (Coplan, 1985: 225)

The aesthetics of township theatre corresponded to the general desire for change. Ian Steadman notes that political theatre had of course existed before the 1970s but it had not captured the popular consciousness.⁶³ The aesthetic of black theatre: declamatory, mythical, masculine, recalling the past positively, and urban: aimed at creating an organic culture uniting blacks against apartheid and creating identities geared towards a positive representation in the modern world.

While Kruger cites a necessary link between protest theatre and resistance theatre, Mda sees them in opposition to each other. Citing Athol Fugard as its main practitioner, Mda says that:

Protest theatre disapprovingly depicts a situation of oppression but it does not go beyond that. It addresses itself to the oppressor, with a view of appealing to his or

⁶³ Ian Steadman, 'Introduction, ' in Maishe Maponya, *Doing Plays for a Change: Five Works*, (Johannesburg: Witswaterand UP, 1995),xiii-xxiii: xxii.

her conscience... it is a theatre of complaint, and sometimes even of weeping. It is variously a theatre of self-pity, of moralising, of mourning, and of hopelessness...

The oppressed suffer in silence, and are not involved in any struggle against oppression. Instead they are involved in a struggle of how to accommodate oppression and survive it, not how to confront it. (Mda, 1994: 4)

Mda calls resistance theatre 'agit-prop' theatre, which 'served as a vehicle for sharing perceptions and insights among the oppressed themselves, and more importantly which attempted to alter perceptions'. But, 'At its worst it became a litany of slogans that denounced the oppressor, and extolled the virtues and prowess of the leaders of the liberation struggle' (Mda, 1994: 5). For Mda, resistance theatre is most useful when it attempts to alter perceptions. This is where his theatre most closely identifies with township theatre. Mda offers a more detailed outline of resistance theatre's attitude from which we can further identify his deviation from it:

He told the story of those who laboured in the belly of the earth to make white South Africa rich. He clearly depicted their condition, their trials, their struggles, and in some cases their defiance and determination to change their situation. But he forgot to tell the story of those who did not follow them to jail or to the mines – the women and children who stayed at home and struggled to make the stubborn and barren soil yield. (Mda, 1996: ix)

...

Generally the South African theatre practitioner shied away from depicting social and class conflicts among the oppressed themselves, and rarely did we see the family – even that one which has been broken down by the laws of apartheid – as a subject for his theatre. (Mda, 1996: x)

In looking at the South African situation from the perspectives ignored by the township writers, Mda contributes uniquely to resistance theatre.⁶⁴ Deviating from the norm in this

⁶⁴ These issues are not outrightly ignored by other writers. In Manaka's *Children of Asazi* (1984), the plot revolves around a family's strained relationships. Diliza the protagonist must choose between his pregnant girlfriend, Charmaine and his policeman father, Nduna. Apartheid is responsible for the strains put upon the family. Percy Mtwa's *Bopha!* (1985) also uses the family to explore a similar theme.

manner, Mda completes Black Consciousness liberation ideology by giving a voice to all oppressed black people, rather than only to those based in the city, who were mostly men. Mda presents the rural areas as just as capable of transformation through resistance. By depicting the struggles of women, the aged and children, Mda takes the field of the liberation struggle from its male-centred heroics to the home. This is clearly defined in *Joys of War* (1983) where a daughter joins her father on the frontline.

Social historical shifts account for the move from protest to resistance theatre. Mda's definitions of protest and resistance theatre, although they identify core differences, represent a shift that corresponds roughly with the social mood. We can draw a similar correlation with Graham Pechey's linking of the demise of liberal themes in South African literature with the waning influence of liberals in society. Political theatre became popular only after Fugard and his collaborators made it a viable theme for township musical producers. Resistance theatre used predominantly workers and worker-related issues because they were prime examples of organised resistance that could be used as practical and successful examples. Also, black South Africans were beginning to disengage from white liberal organisations like NUSAS. Then were they were able to fully address their concerns as black South Africans. The differences between protest and resistance theatre are not clear cut, as Mda makes them out to be. To resist a condition it has first to be shown as inimical to a group or individual. Protest sets the condition for resistance. Mda's own *Dead End* (1979), with elements of the melodramatic, depict the abuses of apartheid on the protagonist Charlie and his girlfriend, but do not go beyond it.

Mda was also concerned that post-apartheid South Africa should not emulate post-independent Africa, whereby one form of oppression would replace another. Underlining this fear is the critique of resistance theatre's tendency to essentialise 'the virtues and prowess of the liberation struggle' through songs of defiance and linking an unproblematic, heroic past with present struggle. *We shall Sing for the Fatherland* (1973) is Mda's warning about fighting a war of freedom that in the end profits the national elite and their Western benefactors.

Exile for Mda influenced the aesthetic quality of his work. Forced to leave South Africa with his family due to his father's political activities, exile necessitated Mda's use of imagination to dramatise the effect of apartheid in shaping peoples' identities. For Mda, apartheid was 'so absurd that it created the stories' (Mda, 1997: 251) for township writers. Because of exile, 'I was forced to use my imagination in order to recreate the situation as I remembered it, or as I thought it would be' (Mda, 1997:251). Thus, the condition of exile places Mda in an intermediary position, but one that, as Bruce King says, is not 'lived simultaneously in a multiplicity of competing cultures' (King, 1992: 3). Mda's position as intermediary cannot yet enter the postmodern discourse of arbitrariness and decentring because of the proximity of his exile to South Africa. Mda's representation of the migrant and of rural areas is shaped directly by South Africa's labour policies, and of the economic landscaping of British Southern Africa through colonialism. Here the margins represent not maps of diversity from which the exiled writer can pick and mix. Rather they represent the economic and political influence of South Africa in the region through the migrant labour system. Hence, postcoloniality and

exile for Mda does not bear the same connotation as it does for Soyinka, Buchi Emecheta, Ben Okri or Salman Rushdie. Mda shares with these writers a certain critical distance that allows him to view the South African situation from a regional perspective, enabling him to take in the experiences of ‘those left behind’.

In effect, Mda’s project enlarges the concerns of Black Consciousness theatre. His race-conscious theatre comments on the human condition under oppression. Mda moves from external representations of defiance and suffering to examine the internal motivations, not only of the oppressed but also of the collaborator (Old Man in *Dark Voices Ring*) and the oppressor (Farmer in *The Road*). Collaboration and resistance may even be linked, as Mda points out in *Joys of War*. Here we find Mda’s liberation politics merge with his humanism, which is typically portrayed, as I shall show, in *We shall Sing for the Fatherland*.

We shall Sing for the Fatherland

In *We shall Sing for the Fatherland* (WSF, written in 1973, first performed in 1979), Mda interrogates class formations in a fictional African state ten years after a war of liberation. Two war veterans, Sergeant-Major and Janabari, live in destitution in the park of the capital city, scavenging and stealing to survive. Sergeant is a dreamer, fixated by the nationalist rhetoric that sustained him on the battlefield. Janabari, his sidekick, has been weathered by the reality of post-independence. The play embodies ‘three themes which recur through Mda – commitment, betrayal and the precariousness of the poor’ (Horn, 1990: xiii). Personal commitment to ideology has led to the betrayal of the foot soldiers

of the liberation war by the emerging indigenous middle class. This betrayal leads to the death from exposure of the ex-soldiers in a public park.

The indigenous elite who benefited from liberation are represented by Businessman. Businessman's relationship with the white Banker exposes the fact that the economy remains under foreign control and that the country is a neocolonial state.⁶⁵ Businessman, elected the first indigenous chairman of the stock exchange goes to lengths to prove his trustworthiness and competence to Banker, who exhibits the paternalism of what Chinua Achebe refers to as a 'Mr-I-know-my-Africa'. Businessman's inferiority complex is enforced by his dependence on external forces for his position. He begs Banker for assurance that his post is secure. Banker's answer exposes the level of dependence of the neocolonial state and its national bourgeoisie on the foreign powers:

...If you do your job well how can they cause trouble for you? The only thing you have to do is listen to our advice. I met your Ministers about this. They too are quite clear about this. They know that without us they would not be where they are now. All this opposition to your taking up the chairmanship is based on mistrust. No African has ever been chairman of the Stock Exchange in this country, you know. And you have been independent for the last ten years. (*WSF*, 13)

The war of liberation has been fought to replace the white oppressors with their black representatives, 'the emerging black capitalist in the emergent Africa', as Banker refers to them (*WSF*, 14). Their interests lie not in restructuring society but in maintaining the economic system in which they act as middlemen for Western interests. Businessman is

⁶⁵ The nature of neocolonialism and the neocolonial state is described in Kwame Nkrumah, *Neocolonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*, (1965; London: 1974), ix; xi

the alienated African, who has used liberation to achieve the political and economic take-over of the nation.⁶⁶

The inability of Sergeant and Janabari to integrate into society stems from the fact that the war was meant to change the prevailing structures of colonialist exploitation. Liberation was meant to forge new identities based on equality. The new society that would create the new identities did not materialise. Sergeant is left with only the rhetoric of the battlefield to maintain a sense of self. In order to sustain this sense, he sees everything as a victory, even the very things they fought to destroy: oppression, exploitation and class division. Janabari opines, 'it is our people who snub us' (*WSF*, 14). The war over, Businessman can assume a contemptuous disregard for the underclass, similar to the contempt shown by colonialism towards the 'native'. Sergeant is ever ready with an excuse that Businessman is busy. He refuses to accept that Businessman is working against their interests. Sergeant refuses to accept that the oppressive structure has changed in colour only, and so sees the replacement of white with black as an achievement in itself. Sergeant's denial of his situation stems also from the need to compensate for his lost leg. He tells Janabari that the war was fought for their freedom, and that having been won they should live, 'for haven't we achieved what we were fighting for? Look, I lost a whole leg in that war. A whole leg. It was not for naught, Janabari' (*WSF*, 11).

⁶⁶ Amilcar Cabral describes the petit bourgeois attitude towards liberation. See Amilcar Cabral, *Return to the Source*, 1973: 47.

Ofisiri, the corrupt policeman, now employed to protect the interests of the rich is of the exploited ranks. The city is to host an international conference on the environment and wants the streets cleared of eyesores. Representative of the government's sentiments towards the poor, Ofisiri informs Sergeant and Janabari, 'Cabinet is interested in you in so far as it wants your type cleared off the streets' (*WSF*, 16). This is ironic, considering the fact that the two ex-soldiers fought to liberate their nation from the very people the government is hosting. Knowing that eventually, they must vacate the park, Ofisiri collects money from them to permit them to stay. Like Businessman, his allegiance is not to the people but to a state that is a vehicle for the self-enrichment of the middle class elite.

Sergeant and Janabari resemble Beckett's tramps in *Waiting for Godot* (1953). Aimless, alienated in the new dispensation, they can offer only a critique of post-independence society through their dead hopes and their need for recognition as humans. Sergeant, too late, realises the limitations of a race-based liberation ideology, for he and Janabari have no place in society. Their job done, they are now irrelevant. After Ofisiri puts out the fire they have lit to keep the winter cold out Sergeant realises 'that it's high time we asserted ourselves, and fought for what is by right ours' (*WSF*, 22). Janabari responds:

... All along Serge, I have been trying to show you that we are not getting our share of whatever there is to be shared. That is what the learned ones call capitalism, Serge. It has no place for us... only for the likes of Mr Mafutha and the other fat ones in the Chamber of Commerce and the Stock Exchange. Serge, I have been trying to tell you that our wars were not merely to replace a white face with a black one, but to change a system which exploits us, to replace it with one which will give us a share in the wealth of this country. What we need is another

war of freedom, Serge – a war which will put this land back into the hands of the people. (*WSF*, 22)

The war of liberation does not end with the terminating of formal colonisation. The battle must continue to reform society. Soon after they die of exposure in the park. Their deaths offer little respite from class oppression. Sergeant, noting the irony, regains his leg in the afterlife: ‘I didn’t have it when I needed it in life. What good will it be now that I am dead?’ (*WSF*, 24) Businessman dies soon after. As ghosts they witness his lavish burial. In the afterlife, religion adheres to the status quo. As Janabari observes, ‘The priests have already decided that he was wealthy enough to go to heaven’ (*WSF*, 25). By showing that in death the poor do not inherit the kingdom, Mda is critical of religion that maintains the status quo.⁶⁷ Religion here pacifies the masses with promises of peace in the afterlife.

Mda’s motives for writing the play were to show the effects of an unfinished liberation struggle in an independent African state. His aim was not to portray such a possibility occurring in a liberated South Africa.⁶⁸ Yet the play is a cautionary tale of the effects upon an emerging society in which political and economic power is retained in the same colonial structures, passing from race hegemony to class hegemony. This in turn affects identity formation, where the race is replaced by class. Mda also shows that, rather than a self-confident middle class emerging, the lack of true liberation leaves the productive forces in the hands of the former colonisers. Without these vital forces, society cannot redirect itself onto the path of self-agency and liberation is incomplete.

⁶⁷ For a critique of the attitude of the ruling class towards religion, see Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, Talcott Parsons ed., E. Fischoff trans., (London: Methuen, 1965), 107.

⁶⁸ See Andrew Horn, ‘Introduction’, *The Plays of Zakes Mda*, (Johannesburg: Ravan, 1990), xiii.

Conclusion

The differences in colonial rule influence how Wole Soyinka and Zakes Mda approach identity in drama from different perspectives to espouse a similar humanism. The less pernicious effects of indirect rule in Nigeria allow Soyinka to retain his cultural confidence. He can thus locate an ideal African identity in his Yoruba culture. In Soyinka, the hero is essentially ontologically constructed, immersed in the social context of a uniquely holistic African world. The Ogun symmetry functions as the operative will to identity, privileging action. The hero instinctively rises to a challenge. While communal ethos is privileged, agency resides with the individual. Soyinka presents society in need of change, where tradition is static and anachronistic, and serves a corrupt hegemony. But the hero who challenges social norms remains within a culturally motivated milieu. Eman and Olundé are still very much their fathers' sons. They are born, not made heroes. They react to social challenge but Soyinka lays an ontological explanation, which lends uniqueness to their actions. Soyinka is saying that within a specifically indigenous location of culture, change can arise. But the site of identity remains within an essentially Yoruba ontology. For Soyinka, an African identity is possible through the discovery of authentic African paradigms. The problem is that the material development from which this culture arises is used unproblematically by Soyinka. The role of indirect rule in the formation of cultural nationalism is largely unexplored.

The immediacy of the South African situation renders such cultural configurations of identity problematic. Black Consciousness theatre rejected rural/traditional aesthetics

because they were implicated in creating bantustan nationalities. This led to the urban bias in their works. The workers were visible examples of how black South Africans could create a culture of resistance. Their actions, along with the students showed that a sense of community through active resistance was attainable. Writing within apartheid and Black Consciousness, Mda creates a non-ideological yet committed theatre that rehabilitates the rural areas into the national liberation effort. Mda's characters respond to the survival instinct created by the alienating environment, rather than to cultural motivation, which would privilege the bantustan ideology. There is a grasp at normalcy but it is always slipping away, constantly reminding the characters of the social pressures upon them. Thus the characters make do with what they have, bringing identity formations within the protest theatre genre. Mda's characters are not outside the absurdity of their condition. They try to arbitrate between their personal needs and those that an alienating society forces upon them. Sergeant and Janabari meet Ofisiri's growing demands till the very end. The struggle within a struggle moulds their identity.

Soyinka and Mda reject the idea of programmed politics but not reject the political implications society hoists upon its citizens. They believe that society cannot survive without change. Both reveal these insights by representing individual struggles with oppression. They recognise the diffuse nature of hegemonic power and thus the diffuse nature of resistance. The degree to which they differ is due to the political nature of their societies during and after independence/liberation. Both dramatists accept that change can come only when those who organise against oppression accommodate the very homogeneity hegemonic power seeks to determine or suppress.

Chapter Three

Identity in the Drama of Wole Soyinka: Themes and Influences

In this chapter, I look at how different themes and influences shape identities in Soyinka's work. I want to determine the extent of Soyinka's theoretical and dramatic practice in shaping an authentic African identity through his Yoruba culture. In the last chapter I looked at how his dramatic theories identify an 'African' authenticity from which he engages with his art. By using myth as an organising principle, Soyinka privileges idealism over a socially determined identity, a strategy that does not resolve the constructedness of the Yoruba identity. The role of indirect rule in facilitating Yoruba nation-ness is not addressed. Instead Yoruba identity is taken as a given, bringing his notions of identity closer to Negritude thought. Soyinka ascribes an assimilative trait to authentic Yoruba identities, which enables cultural growth. But my position is that the same catalyst that created Negritude also creates Soyinka's 'Fourth Stage'. Namely, the nature of colonialism – in Soyinka's case British indirect rule – is the material reality on which Soyinka's theories of identity construction rest.

By following in the tradition of Yoruba historians, creative writers and dramatists, Soyinka continues the identity constructions that have advanced in response to the developments in his society. These developments were set out in Chapters One and Two. The invention of Yoruba history is in line with the desires of indirect rule and of the nationalist self-agency. Since these developments have proceeded out of colonial and anti-colonial historiography, and since Soyinka is a socially responsive writer, then it follows that his works are a form of continuity in both positive and negative respects.

Although, as Etherton states, Soyinka's politics is bound up in his metaphysics,¹ his philosophy of identity does not take into account the role of indirect rule in fashioning ethnicities and his own position claiming to be a Yoruba writer rather than a Nigerian writer. As I have pointed out, Soyinka rejects the constructedness of the nation for an ethnic interpretation, without acknowledging that the ethnic is just as constructed.² Formulating an authentic identity shows Soyinka's desire for what Aime Césaire sees as 'creating community with the world and ourselves' (Césaire, 1969: 160).

It is from a notion of the self-authenticating subject as distinctly Yoruba that Soyinka posits a universal humanism. Soyinka's dramaturgy is not formed in the isolation of Yoruba culture. His characterisation of heroism is based not solely on the Ogun symmetry. Yoruba culture is the ground on which Soyinka's 'astounding assimilative talent' (Booth, 1981: 116) is founded. I have stated that this assimilative ability has led to charges of Eurocentrism against him.³ The themes of contemporary African drama in general are shaped by the colonial encounter, developing into a commentary on the failure of the nation-state in Africa. Colonialism's pervasiveness has made it impossible to fall outside its ambit. To accuse Soyinka of Eurocentrism would mean extending the charge to Hubert Ogunde and Duro Ladipo. These dramatists appropriated European theatre forms, which met with the approval of the majority of their mainly urban audiences. Certainly Ogunde's anti-colonial contributions cannot be deemed as un-African. To charge Soyinka with Eurocentrism, as Chinweizu et al do, is to deny

¹ Michael Etherton, *The Development of African Drama*, (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1982), 242.

² As D.A. Masolo argues in 'African Philosophy and the Postcolonial: Some Misleading Abstractions about "Identity"', in Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, ed., *Postcolonial African Philosophy*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 283-300: 285.

³ See Chinweizu et al, 199.

completely the indigenous assimilative tradition Soyinka writes out of. More important, it rejects outright syncretic values and appropriations that have always been a global cultural phenomenon. It is ironic when we note that both Soyinka and Chinweizu are seeking a similarly Afrocentric approach to aesthetics and identity.

Despite the contradictions in Soyinka's identity constructions, his main theme is the post-independent African nation-state and its problematic entry into European modernity, a subject common to most African writers. The African writer is closely associated with the middle class through education, urban location and audience. The writer's social group is the same as that which guided their nations to independence.⁴ The 'post-independence' themes of these writers expressed disillusionment with the national bourgeoisie's failings. The African nation-state has been unable to develop along Western democratic lines, as the inability to move from a bifurcated rural-urban colonial system has hampered national development. A lack of vision has kept African nations shackled to the long chain of neocolonialism and 'underdevelopment'.⁵ Concerned writers observed disappointedly as social inequalities increased, and as opportunities for wealth were limited to the privileged few. It became clear that, far from harbouring visions of national progress, the African elite were concerned for mainly personal gratification.⁶ This phenomenon

⁴ James Booth draws a comparison between the relationship of African writers with the bourgeoisie of post-independent Africa and European writers of the 18th to 19th centuries. The African writer belongs to the culturally dominant class, which is also politically dominant. 'In Africa, however, the peculiarly hollow and flimsy nature of the new bourgeoisie makes the writer's role in relation to it more uncomfortable than it was in Europe. The European writer could at least usually identify himself with the 'better self' of his class, its more permanent and worthwhile ideals. And it was, after all, a creative and dynamic class at the ideological growing point of his society. In Africa the writer is likely to feel quite alienated from the under-developed bourgeoisie, and so radically unsure of his artistic role.' James Booth, *Writers and Politics in Nigeria*, (New York: Africana Publishing Group, 1981), 20-1.

⁵ Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, (London: Bogle-L'Ouverture, 1972).

⁶ Elizabeth Isichei reveals a variety of reasons for the corrupt nature of politicians, citing poverty as the main problem. 'The frantic accumulation of wealth was meant to build a wall between themselves and poverty, between their children and poverty. And, like their predecessors, the Warrant Chiefs, whom in some ways they resembled, they were expected to be generous, by Western standards absurdly generous, to relations, fellow townsmen and constituents. A successful

repeated itself with every flag-waving celebration that signalled self-rule across the continent, leading to a similarity of themes by writers on the post-independence condition. The writer began to identify with the neglected majority, opposing the very group that was their main target audience for dramatic and literary production.

In Soyinka's drama, social and political changes determine the shifts in theme and character. We can gauge his commitment from these shifts – his commenting on current national political and social issues. From the obscure symbol-laden cautions of *A Dance of the Forests* (1963) to the savage satire of *A Play of Giants* (1984), Soyinka has kept his ear close to the concerns of the masses and has adjusted his aesthetic accordingly to integrate their concerns into his own vision. Through his themes and influences I want to see how his identity constructions have met the new challenges that have arisen in the unreconstructed nation-state.

I will proceed by showing how Soyinka's ideas of identity shift with social developments in Nigeria, and how there is a corresponding artistic shift in his work to represent these identity formations. Certain themes recur in Soyinka's identities. They are family and morals. Afterwards, I will look at some of the early influences that show Soyinka working in a socially derived Yoruba artistic tradition. The themes and use of satire especially influence his non-mythic work. What we will see is that these indigenous influences are more apparent in his satires than in his early tragic works.

man had to be seen to be successful – to wield power, to display wealth, to spend it freely- or his constituents would begin to wonder whether he was successful at all'. Isichei, 468. Such was the problem encountered by Obi Okonkwo in Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*, (London: Heinemann, 1960).

Family

Continuity establishes Soyinka's concern for authenticity. Continuity resides in the family through heredity. Eman and Olunde take up the roles that they were born into. Continuity can be undermined, as in the relationship between brothers in *The Swamp Dwellers*, where the new social patterns shaped by the rural/urban dichotomy lead to estrangement between them. Continuity is threatened in the conflict between age and youth. The young challenge cultural norms in response to a changing environment. The conflict is usually between father and son, a situation C. L. Innes notes is common among nationalist writers.⁷

The family sets up Soyinka's philosophy of identity in the same way as Yoruba mythology states that all Yorubas descend from one father, Oduduwa.⁸ The conflicts that take place within the family are considered internal. This is an important aspect of Soyinka's reason for seeing colonialism in *Death* as of secondary value. The concern of the play is the retention of cultural practices in a changing social complex. But the problems of the ritual suicide could not have occurred without colonial intervention. Intervention takes places not just directly, in the prevention of the suicide, but also on a larger scale in the new identities and power shifts caused by colonial occupation.

The family in the Yoruba traditional system extends beyond the nuclear unit to the compound. From the compound the family enters into the community.⁹ Within this social

⁷ C.L. Innes, "'Forging the Conscience of their Race': Nationalist Writers," in Bruce King, ed. *New National and Post-Colonial Literatures: An Introduction*, (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1996), 120-139: 124-5.

⁸ Awolalu, 2, 57. Johnson's account states that the Yoruba descended from Oduduwa's father, Lamurudu.

⁹ Segun Gbadegesin, 'Individuality, Community, and the Moral Order,' in P.H. Coetzee and A.P.J. Roux, *The African Philosophy Reader* (London: Routledge, 1998), 292-305: 293.

matrix the individual is formed and so 'growing children are able to see themselves as a part of a household and not as atoms' (Gbadegesin, 1998: 293). A social mentality privileging the community over the individual develops. It leads to the saying: 'I am because we are: I exist because the community exists' (Gbadegesin, 1998: 293-4). This justifies Soyinka's describing the role of individual sacrifice based on communal gain as part of traditional ethics.

Yet Soyinka predicates his ideal identity on the hero as unique individual. Soyinka's individuals are fiercely independent. They do not adhere to any religion or ideology. Rather, they see themselves as part of a community in which the social vision is betrayed, threatened, or one in which they desire to move on from. Eman rejects the carrier role but when his father's prophecy comes true, that 'no woman survives the bearing of the strong ones', Eman forsakes female companionship. Olunde understands the responsibility of the individual in society and returns to Oyo expecting to bury his father. But he takes a unilateral decision on a tradition that has outlived its usefulness. The individuality of Eman and Olunde is shaped by ethical objectivism. Within this moral individuality is the pressure of their social being, instinctive of right and wrong in a universal context. This is the argument Olunde makes with Jane Pilkings for his father's ritual suicide.¹⁰

Daodu, acknowledging the inability of the old order to challenge Kongi's government, commits sacrilege by breaking the King's drum, an act that forces the old order to accept that it must adjust to combat the threat to its existence. Daodu's first battle is to break free from his traditional role. His is a syncretic identity, able to operate comfortably in

modern and traditional spheres. He stands in contrast to both his traditional father and the pseudo-modern Kongi. Only through violence can he attain freedom from both of them.

Family disintegration as an effect of social transformation heightens in *Madmen and Specialists*, where Bero kills his father in order to free himself of moral responsibility.

Bero's act functions in a manner similar to Daodu's except in its contradistinction of purpose. Bero literally aims at cutting off his links to society so that he can attain and use power by all means. Here, Bero will not need a community in which to shape his identity. Rather, he will shape identities in order to suit his personal ambition. Society is turned on its head.

Moral Identity

Eman and Olunde bear in common a moral inflexibility that orders their relationship with society. Their morals are not shaped completely by their communities. Both rebel against the pollution of cleansing rituals, yet they offer no alternatives to them. Their ethical objectivism is located in a liberalism that centres on the right of the individual over the community. This is of interest, for Soyinka redefines this European concept of liberalism with an African one that privileges communal identity. But the tensions remain within the individual, as the social fabric wears due to transformations in the local and national space.

Ritual failure is the basis upon which the moral individual acts. Ritual failure returns the individual to a communal enterprise when he or she takes up an act of supererogation.

¹⁰ *Death*, 191-199.

These acts are taken up for the welfare of the community. Eman fulfils the carrier role to protect Ifada. Olunde assumes his father's position to maintain harmony of his society's world. In both cases, a schism in the social fabric refuses closure. In Olunde's case, the threat is against the very identity of the Oyo people. The end result of both plays is uncertainty.

The action of Eman and Olunde make them unique. Their distinctiveness comes from the way they relate with society and can be described through the linguistic terms, idiolect and sociolect. Idiolect refers to the language of an individual within a community, whose language is the sociolect. When Olunde explains his support for his father's suicide to Jane, it is on universal humanistic terms of sacrifice, not in the terms of his culture.

Olunde makes no attempt to interpret ritual sacrifice to Jane. Eman, in taunting the village patriarchs tell them that a village that cannot produce its own carrier has no men. Eman's position is refracted through his own community's tradition but it is humanistic all the same. His deliberate slight to the patriarchs backfires and he ends up continuing their tradition of using strangers for the carrier.

Exile shapes the moral individualism of Eman and Olunde. Both leave home in order to escape their fathers. Responding to moments of crisis, Eman and Olunde act within a social sphere. But the terms of the social sphere are heavily tinted by their individual interpretations of the social hero. It derives not from Kunene's Afrocentric definition of heroism, but from Soyinka's Afrocentric humanistic recovery of a suitable individual

identity in determining a communal identity. We see this formula in Freud's theory of how the individual and a civilisation develop an identity:

The super-ego of an epoch of civilisation has an origin similar to that of an individual. It is based on the impression left behind by the personalities of great leaders – men of overwhelming force of mind or men in whom one of the human impulses has found its strongest and purest, and therefore often its most one-sided expression. (Freud, 1996: 155)

The multifarious nature of identity that Soyinka locates in his Ogun symmetry cannot express itself in his heroes because their actions emerge from crisis. In this instance, leadership qualities emanate from a 'one-sided expression' in response to crisis. Limited by expediency, Eman and Olunde impress fatality on the community as the most enduring characteristic, rather than resistance.

Dissatisfaction with the post-independence national elite and the lack of appropriate leadership role models sustain Soyinka's imaginary authentic African subject. By locating identities in a mythical and essentialist framework, the space of possibility remains open. This opening should refute the existential, humanistic pessimism of his tragedies but it does not. Soyinka's tragedies, as we shall see later, fail to incorporate the community. They are personal tragedies.

Having identified two key themes that contribute to his identity constructions, I will look at his early traditional influences. Modern Yoruba dramatists worked mainly in popular theatre, where satire was the main genre. Their works reflected pre- and post-

independence society and its changing attitudes. I wish to see how these influences appear in Soyinka's own subject forming philosophy of Yoruba identity.

Early Influences: Traditional

Soyinka justifies his syncretistic theatre practice in his philosophical construction of an authentic African/Yoruba identity. There is an historical progression in the way Yoruba theatre developed out of traditional forms and merged with European theatre models.

Theatre and music were the most effective art forms used to promote Yoruba culture and to indigenise Western culture and Christianity. Indigenisation began in the African churches where figures of Yoruba popular theatre, Duro Ladipo, Hubert Ogunde and Kola Ogunmola for example, first experimented with indigenous dramatic techniques in the Church. Their early works, in the form of Yoruba Opera, were a syncretism between indigenous theatre forms and Christian worship. Ogunde used his theatre to address social ills under the colonial regime and after independence, to comment on the political events of the Western Region crisis. Soyinka was exposed to the popular travelling theatre of Moses Olaiya and Ojo Ladipo, which relied heavily on satire for their popularity and which Soyinka uses in *Opera Wonyosi* (1977) and *A Play of Giants* (1984) to comment upon society's ills. Soyinka's use of this form is relevant because 'The traditional Yoruba dramatist uses his art to explain his knowledge of the world through satirical representations' (Adedeji, 1979: 52). And like Yoruba popular theatre, Soyinka analyses individuals rather than society at large. By satirising individuals, Soyinka urges his audience to rethink their positions and not to follow blindly corrupt leaders.

Soyinka gains most from the indigenous artistic influence in his non-mythical works. Focusing on individual responsibility, Soyinka comments on the social mentality rather than on a desired communal ethic. His works prior to the Civil War were confined to culturally homogeneous settings. Society identified collectively with ritual, forming a stable basis of identity in plays like *The Swamp Dwellers* and *The Strong Breed*. In these plays, society's cultural unity is upset. After the Civil War Soyinka could no longer write such plays, although he did publish *Death and the King's Horseman* in 1975. The main influence Soyinka derives from traditional popular theatre in both mythic and non-mythic works is emphasis on individual responsibility. Social changes during and after independence contribute to Soyinka's thinking of a unique identity and his grounding it in Yoruba ontology. What changed Soyinka's direction was the attitude of the national elite towards the nation-state.

Independent Nigeria soon descended into political turmoil in the hands of the national elite.¹¹ Sectarianism, the parting gift of indirect rule, became the criteria for government decisions in the four regions and in the central government. At the time of nationalist political activity geared towards independence in 1960, Soyinka was studying in Britain at the University of Leeds (1954-57). After finishing his studies he moved to London, where he was on attachment to the Royal Court Theatre (1957- 59).¹² He identified the opportunism of the early post-independence politicians and of his colleagues:

I took one look at our first set of legislators – you know, partial self-government at the time – when they visited the U.K... and I listened to them... and I

¹¹ For the events that led up to the disintegration of the First Republic, see Isichei, 465-480. Crowder, 259-277.

¹² See P. Roberts, *The Royal Court Theatre and the Modern Stage*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999).

knew... That instant, I received... instant illumination. I realised that the first enemy was within. If there was any shadow of doubt, it was soon removed by the pattern of thought which developed among my erstwhile 'comrades' from whom all thought of liberation in Southern Africa, etc, also suddenly disappeared, but for very different reasons. They could not wait to return home and get a slice of 'independence cake', because that was all independence meant to them: step fast into the shoes of the departing whites before other people got there. (Soyinka, 1984: xiii)

The attitude of this generation continued to be a major theme in Soyinka's work dealing with leadership, which is incorporated into his scepticism of the nation-state. By locating identity in the local sphere, Soyinka imagines community as a monad, framed by similar beliefs and a single sociolect. But this strategy insufficiently addresses the larger issues affecting modern Africa, and so he uses satire to comment on the ruling class in the later period of his career.

Returning to Nigeria in 1960, Soyinka took up a Rockefeller Research Fellowship the following year to study rituals with dramatic potential. From this research he formulated the concept of Yoruba tragedy which would appear in published form as 'The Fourth Stage' in 1969.¹³ According to Soyinka, '*The Fourth Stage* was in fact published in its first and only draft – I was arrested and became incommunicado soon after I sent it to the editor requesting him to pass it on to G. Wilson Knight, my former Professor at Leeds, for his comments' (Soyinka, 1995: ix). The arrest refers to Soyinka being held in solitary confinement for two years (1967-69) after trying to broker peace between the factions of the Nigerian Civil War (1968-71), an experience he narrates in his prison notes, *The Man Died* (1972).

¹³ 'The Fourth Stage' was published as a contribution to a *festschrift* to his former lecturer, the Shakespeare scholar, G. Wilson Knight. See D.W. Jefferson, ed., *The Morality of Art*, 1969, 119-134.

Soyinka's development of Yoruba myth involves a comparative study of Western aesthetic concepts. He gained insight into the possibilities of creating an aesthetic varied enough to incorporate diverse influences, which feeds into his humanism that is the mainstay of his art and his politics. Soyinka believes that 'there is a meeting point within human experience, within the collective memory of humanity, within the mythologizing attitude and inclinations of mankind. There are so many meeting points and it's foolish to deny their existence' (Soyinka, 1992: 101). As a writer unburdened by the constraints of ideology, Soyinka cannot deny the presence of external influences, an impossibility considering the flexible nature of his culture, the syncretic practices of his artistic predecessors and Nigeria's colonial history. Where he denies external influence is in his construction of a Yoruba identity as an exemplum of African identity formations.

Soyinka worked with Western forms of myth and drama, following the practices of pre-independence nationalists and dramatists like Ogunde and novelists like Fagunwa, syncretising different cultures to inform the local experience. The uniqueness of situation and identity is conveyed in the characterisation of their work: Yoruba artists responding to their particular environment. Soyinka writes for a universal audience but insists he is a Yoruba writer, not only in a worldwide context, but also within the Nigerian context:

The Nigerian writer is a creature in formation. Obviously we're bound to end up as a hybridization. Well I'm not a Hausa writer. There is the Hausa culture, the Tiv culture – we have several cultures in Nigeria – so that makes me primarily a Yoruba writer. There's no question at all about it to my mind, I'm primarily a Yoruba writer... (Soyinka, 1992: 96)

Soyinka's difficulty in seeing Nigeria as an organic entity stems from his desire for authenticity, which colonial intervention renders impossible. The divisive nature of indirect rule has made it difficult for the nation to work for common interests that foster the communal harmony Soyinka sees as conditional for growth and renewal. The merging of disparate ethnicities into distinct geographical boundaries renders the creation of a single national identity nearly impossible. Yet colonialism is the crucial part of Nigeria's modern history. Without it, Nigeria would not exist. Negritude and Pan-Africanism stem from the same desire as Soyinka's to rediscover an authentic, pristine imaginary, where Africa connotes a single indivisible group. These attempts, like Soyinka's, were made possible by Africa's entry into the global network through Western education and foreign travel to cosmopolitan areas of the colonial powers. Soyinka's own work reflects several influences of the Western cultural canon that were part of his colonial education and further cultural, aesthetic contact.

Soyinka claims these influences as legitimate use for the creative writer. They inform his identity formations and his theory of Yoruba tragedy on which his ideal Ogun symmetry is formed. They also reflect in the disillusion of post-Civil War Nigeria, as we shall see below, starting with the influence of Nietzsche on Soyinka's theory of tragedy.

Nietzsche's The Birth of Tragedy

The Birth of Tragedy (1872)¹⁴ acts as an organising principle around which Soyinka derives his critical exposition of tragedy and authentic identity. It is the recurring influence of 'The Fourth Stage'. Nietzsche seeks the roots of Greek tragedy in 'the

expression of two interwoven artistic impulses, *the Apolline and the Dionysiac*' (Nietzsche, 1993: 59). Nietzsche's Dionysus is the 'ecstatic artist' whose art develops without the mediation of the human artist. Both his art and the Apolline spring from nature itself. One is the ecstatic and boundless state of human nature while the other is the form, which structures this abandon within a level of order. 'When the Dionysian element rules, ecstasy and inchoateness threaten; when the Apolline predominates, the tragic feeling recedes' (Stern, 1978: 44). For Nietzsche, both are essential to the Greek classical notion of tragedy. Nietzsche privileges the Dionysian element because it stems from man's natural state, which has become circumscribed by rationality. This rationality is brought about by humanity's attempt to seek protection from the terrors of existence that end, finally, in death. From the fall of the Titanic order to the institution of the Olympians, humanity's quest for life is sought in the shadow of death. The quest becomes clouded by pessimism: 'The best of all things is something entirely outside your grasp: not to be born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. But the second-best thing for you – is to die soon' (Nietzsche, 1993: 22). For the Greeks:

How else could life have been born by a race so sensitive, so impetuous in its desires, so uniquely capable of *suffering*, if it had not been revealed to them, haloed in a higher glory, in their gods? The same impulse that calls art into existence, the complement and apotheosis of existence, also created the Olympian world with which the Hellenic 'will' held up a transfiguring mirror to itself. Thus the gods provide a justification for the life of man by living it themselves – the only satisfactory form of theodicy! Existence under the bright sunlight of gods such as these was felt to be the highest goal of mankind, and the true grief felt by Homeric man came from the departure from it, especially when that departure was near. (Nietzsche, 1993: 23)

¹⁴ All references from the 1993 edition.

Nietzsche inverts Silenus' words. Rather than wishing never to have been born, what if the desire is not to die? Instead, the will clings to life rather than resigns itself to death. Thus there is a reduction of man's perception of the world in the form of art. Myths lose their original power as art secularises the sacred: 'Art is one of the ruses of life, tragedy (we recall) has always had a vital function: to protect men from a full knowledge of the life-destroying doom that surrounds them, and at the same time to refresh their zest for life from tragedy's own dark Stygian sources' (Stern, 1978: 45). As humanity's desire for and control of the phenomenal world increases, so that which is described as human nature decreases. The relationship between human and nature becomes increasingly tenuous, falling into a division where the progress of one is a triumph over the other. Myth, the adhesive that has kept existence as a holistic unit, has been mastered by humanity through art. Nietzsche reminds us:

Yet without myth all culture loses its healthy and natural creative power: only a horizon surrounded by myth can unify an entire cultural movement. Myth alone rescues all the powers of imagination and the Apolline dream from their aimless wanderings. The images of myth must be the daemonic guardians, omnipresent and unnoticed, which protect the growth of the young mind, and guide man's interpretation of his life and struggles. The state itself has no unwritten laws more powerful than the mythical foundation that guarantees its connection with religion and its growth out of mythical representations. (Nietzsche, 1993: 109)

In idealising a Yoruba identity, Soyinka similarly relies on myth to create a unified state, a stable point from which to construct an aesthetic of tragedy, the highest form of Western art. The binding power of myth ties the Yoruba nation together with its 'unwritten laws'. The Yoruba gods stand side by side in a symmetrical equation to their Hellenic brothers - Ogun/Dionysus and Obatala/Apollo. Soyinka states clearly the

particularity of the cultures in which these juxtapositions are made. Following Nietzsche, the culture in which the Greek gods inhabit is 'dead'. It no longer performs the social function. Human rationality has alienated them from their gods, from nature and from themselves. Comparatively, the Yoruba are not detached from the world. Myth in Yoruba society is still active in organising existence. Art is an active agent in society, not merely illusionary or imitative:

But Obatala the sculptural god is not the artist of Apollonian illusion but of inner essence. The idealist bronze and terra-cotta of Ife which may tempt the comparison implicit in 'Apollonian' died at some now forgotten period, evidence only of the universal surface culture of courts and never again resurrected. It is alien to the Obatala spirit of Yoruba 'essential' art. Obatala finds expression, not in Nietzsche's Apollonian 'mirror of enchantment' but as a statement of world resolution. The mutual tempering of illusion and will, necessary to an understanding of the Hellenic spirit, may mislead us when we are faced with Yoruba art, for much of it has a similarity in its aesthetic serenity to the plastic arts of the Hellenic. Yoruba traditional art is not ideational however, but 'essential'. It is not the idea (in religious arts) that is transmitted into wood or interpreted in music or movement, but a quintessence of inner being, a symbolic interaction of the many aspects of revelations (within a universal context) with their moral apprehension. (Soyinka, 1995: 141)

Art and myth still perform a social function. They represent the actual Yoruba essence.

Soyinka compares Ogun with Obatala, as Nietzsche does with Dionysus and Apollo:

'Obatala is the placid essence of creation; Ogun the creative urge and instinct, the essence of creativity' (Soyinka, 1995: 141). Soyinka makes this comparison to justify his preference for Ogun out of the 401 deities as a model of unique Yoruba identity.

Following Nietzsche's argument about the division modernity creates between humanity and nature, Soyinka finds Ogun appropriate to show the uniqueness of the holistic Yoruba world. Ogun creates the basis of the ritual of reunification that essentialises the

Yoruba perception of the holistic world. Soyinka uses Nietzsche's interpretation of myth to legitimise an ontological difference between the Western mind and the African mind. Colonialism becomes the moment of Nietzschean modernity creating the Dionysian-Apollonian dichotomy. The unique Yoruba mind resists this dichotomy, and therefore identity remains authentic. Ogun's ability to accept change lessens the impact of colonial intrusion, admitting gainful experience in a process of growth through accommodation.

Through myth Soyinka asserts a fluid notion of identity, one capable of exploring human multiplicity and thus activating a non-monolithic notion of being. In doing so, Soyinka moves out of the Manichean binarity of identity. He provides a space in which identity is multifarious because the social location of colonialism, central as it might be to the African modern experience forms only part of the engagement with the world. And so we see in Soyinka's earlier works a focus away from the nation to a homogeneous culture instead. This is the only way he can create an authentic identity. So the colonial encounter forms only a backdrop to the tragic events in *Death*, 'an incident, a catalytic incident merely' (Soyinka, 1998: 145).

Ogun's act of daring forms the essential core of Yoruba tragedy, and the ideal to which Soyinka's heroes aspire. Though, 'For the Yoruba, the gods are the final measure of eternity, as humans are of earthly transience' (Soyinka, 1995: 143), they form part of a holistic world in which past, present and future co-exist. Ritual functions to negotiate between these planes, healing ruptures and bridging gaps, incorporating change and accommodating growth. Ritual balances relationships between humans and the rest of the

Yoruba world. Obatala, for Soyinka is too serene a deity to contain these disparities in a way acceptable to the force of human will. For Obatala, patience is the greatest virtue. He endures suffering without complaint.¹⁵ Obatala negates the very aspect of human nature fundamental to the type of social hero that Soyinka deems necessary to dare the unknown. Like Aristotle's idea of the tragic figure, Soyinka's Ogun embodies all elements of human nature and therefore he is like us. Obatala resembles more the suffering Greeks of Nietzsche, accepting pain as intrinsic to existence. Obatala bears his suffering in solitude, yet the consequences of his imprisonment are felt by all.¹⁶ In Soyinka's formulation, the reverse is the case, where the hero suffers for the community.

Humans and deities appear with Ogun in his passion play. Ogun cuts a path through the primordial marsh. He slaughters the people of Ire in battle. Palm wine features prominently in both the myths of Ogun and Obatala. Ogun's drunkenness causes him to kill his own soldiers at Ire. Obatala's drunken state causes him to create all configurations of humans. But while Ogun permits his followers to drink, Obatala's followers must abstain from palm wine. To both deities, wine is not synonymous with the revelries and debaucheries associated with Dionysus. Rather, palm wine is a signifier of their contrasting temperaments. For Ogun it is a source of dare, to continually challenge the cause of one's greatest regret. For Obatala it is a source of mortification. The cause of Ogun's tragedy and his ability to continue to tempt may also signify an attitude towards tragedy, not of resignation but one that rejects the inertia of fate signalled by Silenus.

¹⁵ For a dramatic representation of Obatala's patience in the midst of provocation, see Ijimere, 1966.

¹⁶ Ijimere, 1966.

For one who sees the colonial imposition as an aberration, Soyinka's search for an authentic aesthetic of traditional art has led him far afield culturally. Soyinka's construction of an indigenous dramatic form leads Ketu Katrak to claim, 'Soyinka has successfully devised a new form, Yoruba tragedy, which is integrally connected to a new ideology' (Katrak, 1986: 17). This claim suggests that prior to Soyinka writing 'The Fourth Stage' there was no coherent theory of an indigenous form of tragedy. It certainly seems the case, considering Soyinka's reliance on *The Birth of Tragedy* as a framework around which this unique speculation is built. But as Derek Wright comments, Western critics take as given the prior existence of a coherent Yoruba concept of tragic drama when approaching Soyinka's work. He asks:

But what exactly is "Yoruba tragedy"?... Soyinka's models, in fact, appear to exist in a vacuum, his ill-defined "ritual-drama" hovering uncertainly, midway between festival masque-dramaturgy and Duro Ladipo's mythological theatre, and his concept of "Yoruba tragedy" lying somewhere between Ladipo's stagework and his own. He nowhere defines "Yoruba tragedy", or says what he means by "tragic"... (Wright, 1999: 164-5)

In the build-up to this argument, Wright emphasises the problem in Soyinka's use of the word 'tragedy' itself. The problem stems from Soyinka's use of a wide number of sources, which Wright says:

testifies to the complexity and possible confusion of Soyinka's intellectual position. At times this appears to be so far removed from the Western model that the reader wonders why he bothers to use the Western term "tragedy" at all, while at other times it seems so close to the Western tragic world view as hardly to warrant a separate Yoruba form. (Wright, 1999: 163)

In his early work, Soyinka made limited use of his research findings of the dramatic properties of rituals and traditional festivals. *The Strong Breed* (1963) uses the motif of the carrier as its theme, but there is no fusion of the rites into the fabric of the play.¹⁷

What we see is a failed attempt. Eman twice refuses to complete his training/preparation for the role. We are left to accept that he is a carrier by heredity and by force of will.

Eman dies and Soyinka wants us to accept that as in Aristotle's concept of tragedy, or as in an African (the location is not stated) concept of social heroism, society benefits

through a cathartic release. But what we are left with at the end is uncertainty, one not

dissimilar to the uncertainty at the end of *Death*. Iyaloja's final words are: 'Now forget the dead, forget even the living. Turn your mind only to the unborn' (Soyinka, 1998:

219). An earlier work, *Dance* (1963) is a 'mish-mash of Ibo, Ijaw and Yoruba ceremonial practices which don't draw precisely upon any single ritual form' (Wright, 1999: 161).¹⁸

Soyinka's overriding thought, therefore, is humanistic. Universality of the human condition is his major concern. Yoruba traditional thought is his base. In it lies the basic human common thread that ties his experience to the world. From here he sets off on a search through other traditions. 'Thus without seeking a point by point correspondence between Yoruba thought and Soyinka's work, we can say that the former serves as a foundation for the latter, that the collective system represents a global reference for the

¹⁷ Oyin Ogunba directs us to Robin Horton's study, 'New Year in the Delta,' in *Nigeria Magazine*, 67: 256-296. In his study of *The Strong Breed*, Ogunba says the carrier phenomenon is from the Delta area of Nigeria, and not from the Yoruba area. See Oyin Ogunba, *The Movement of Transition: A Study of the Plays of Wole Soyinka*, (Ibadan: Ibadan UP, 1975), 103-124. In an interview Soyinka corroborates the source of the carrier motif from this part of Nigeria: 'In *The Strong Breed* I utilize a ritual which is a very common one which takes many forms among the riverine people on the West Coast of Africa, certainly in Nigeria what we call the "river people" there.' 'An Interview with Wole Soyinka' by Henry Louis Gates, Jr, in Biodun Jeyifo, ed., *Conversations with Wole Soyinka*, (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2001), 48-67: 58.

¹⁸ Abiola Irele who feels that in *Dance*, Soyinka is not in full control of his symbolic scheme shares this view in an earlier critique. See Irele, 190.

individual artist's expression' (Irele, 1981: 193). This makes it difficult to define what exactly constitutes an authentic African identity within the metaphysical space and within a universal humanism. For if there is an inability to mark out these tropes of authenticity, then it allows for the Eurocentric charge to stick, since we can clearly define these influences in Soyinka's work.¹⁹

As I have stated, Soyinka had to find a new aesthetic to interrogate the post-war mentality of Nigerians. Apart from satire, he also used a different concept of tragedy. This new concept is also informed by a Western notion of tragedy.

The Euro-Modernists: Samuel Beckett and Bertholt Brecht

In the aftermath of the Nigerian civil war, Soyinka's identities became less informed by myth. With the exception of *Death* (1975), Soyinka shows concern for the nation on a more material scope. The economic inequality and ethnic suspicions that were evident before the war continued to exist during and after its end. In several interviews²⁰ and in his prison notes, *The Man Died*, Soyinka explains his opposition to the war. He believed it was being fought for the wrong reasons. He did not believe that Biafran secession was the solution to the ethnic problem.²¹ His attempts, as part of a 'third force', to mediate between the two factions led to his solitary confinement in a Federal jail after returning from a meeting with the Biafran military leader, Odumegwu Ojukwu.

¹⁹ For a study on the influence of Nietzsche and Knight, see Anne B. Davis, 'Dramatic Theory of Wole Soyinka,' in James Gibbs, ed., *Critical Perspectives on Wole Soyinka*, (London, 1981), 147-157.

²⁰ In one such interview, Soyinka states: 'The root cause of the Civil War certainly was not secession. Secession was merely a sort of critical event in their long line of national betrayal, desecration of values in the community, an inequitable society, clannishness, petty chauvinism, personal ambition. But most important of all, the emasculation, the negation, of certain restraining and balancing institutions within the society, by cliques and caucuses within the community. All of which were definitely inimical to the aspirations of the masses of people.' Interview with Gates, 51.

²¹ Interview with Gates, 61.

The insensitivity of the leaders reached its apogee with the wedding of the Federal military leader, Yakubu Gowon, during the war.²² The fall of a major Biafran town, Umuahia, was meant to be dedicated as a wedding present to Gowon.²³ The failure to address the underlying factors of the war brought a new perspective to Soyinka's work. *Madman and Specialists* (1971) was his first play after his release in 1969. The mythological underpinnings of a unique identity proved inadequate to deal with issues that required a more concrete and immediate response. *Death* received a frosty reception during its 1976 University of Ife production.²⁴ Aristotelian tragedy seemed inappropriate, when the agents of national instability were the elite. The masses bore the brunt of the decadence displayed by the ruling class. The concept of self-sacrifice, when concerted action was needed, appeared defeatist. So did the concomitant idea of a single individual hero/redeemer with unique attributes. Soyinka's store of other creative references would come into use: Yoruba satire and Euro-modernist playwrights from Chekhov to Brecht.

The Euro-modernist influence on Soyinka is social as well as artistic. The modern playwrights of Europe reflected their dissatisfaction with the bourgeois mentality of their society. Their perception was that modernity had destroyed a humane existence through two world wars. Their attitude reflected an antecedent of the late nineteenth century poets. Robert Brustein comments: 'The modern drama, in short, rides in on the second wave of Romanticism – not the cheery optimism of Rousseau, with his emphasis on institutional reform, but rather the dark fury of Nietzsche, with his radical demands for a

²² *The Man Died*, 232-240.

²³ *The Man Died*: 234-235.

total transformation of man's spiritual life' (Brustein, 1964: 8). Writers of this mode extend from Ibsen, Strindberg and Chekhov to Brecht, O' Neill and Beckett. The 'epic' theatre of Brecht and the 'absurd' drama of Beckett were a remove from the early notable influences of Soyinka. These writers were anti-Aristotelian,²⁵ anti-heroic, and anti-idealist. Beckett's characters were blighted, the reverse side of a conforming bourgeoisie, and without any institutional attachment (i.e., to state or religion). In Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952), the language and stage sets convey humanity stripped of all ideological and social dressing.²⁶ With nothing but themselves and the hope that Godot will show up, all the tramps can do is wait.

Apart from interest in Brecht's stagecraft and his use of film in theatre, Soyinka was attracted to the social aspect of his work.²⁷ For Brecht, '*the radical transformation of the theatre* can't be the result of some artistic whim. It has simply to correspond to the whole radical transformation of the mentality of our time' (Brecht, 1978: 23). Although Brecht committed himself to communism, his plays went beyond mere political proselytising.²⁸ This aspect appealed to Soyinka, as he states:

²⁴ James Gibbs, *Wole Soyinka*, (London: Macmillan, 1986), 126.

²⁵ The nature of Brecht's anti-Aristotelianism is contested in Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*, (1952; London: Hogarth Press, 1987), 278. Anti-Aristotelianism is also contested in absurdist drama in Katherine Burkman, *The Arrival of Godot: Ritual Patterns in Modern Drama*, (U.S.A., London, Canada: Associated UP, 1986), 15-17.

²⁶ 'For... Beckett... the form, structure and mood of an artistic statement can not be separated from its meaning, its conceptual content; simply because the work of art as a whole *is* its meaning, *what* is said in it is indissolubly linked with the *manner* in which it is said, and can not be said any other way.' See, Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, (London: Eyre Methuen, 1974), 24.

²⁷ As well as Soyinka and Mda, Brecht's theatre has had an influence on post-colonial writers writing from an anti-nationalistic point of view. See Aparna Dharwadka, 'John Gay, Bertholt Brecht and Postcolonial Antinationalisms,' in *Modern Drama*, 38.1 (1995), 4-23: 6.

²⁸ Robert Brustein says that though Brecht suppressed his early instinctual character to communist discipline, he was never wholly convinced human character was shaped by only responses to capitalism. 'Even at his most scientifically objective, Brecht continues to introduce a subjective note; even at his most social and political, he remains an essentially moral and religious poet'. Robert Brustein, *The Theatre of Revolt*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1964), 231.

I do not believe that I have any obligation to enlighten, to instruct, to teach: I do not possess that sense of duty or didacticism – very much unlike Brecht for instance, for, you see, what I like in Brecht is his sort of theatre, its liveliness and freedom, not so much his purpose or intentions. (Soyinka, 1972: 173).

However, Soyinka's satires expose social ills, even if they do not offer any solution.

Brecht's epic theatre sought to bring about what he called a 'complex seeing' of drama.

Epic theatre updated and restored the chorus and the narrator to the performance to create a 'distance' between the performers and the audience which Brecht termed the

'Alienation effect.' Brecht attacked 'the central naturalist thesis of the "illusion of reality", in which an action is created that is so like life that the verisimilitude absorbs the whole attention of both dramatist and audience' (Williams, 1987: 278).²⁹ This influence of the epic form, along with the acting style, the 'gest', would allow for a complex seeing which entailed bringing the audience out of an emotional response to the dramatic event.

The intent was to engage the intellect to address certain given situations seen as immutable, that they are created by humans and can therefore be changed.

Soyinka's myth plays focus on the human capacity for change within an indigenous aesthetic, and this is where contradictions appear. By forming identities with myths, and by placing his theory of tragedy alongside Western traditions, the contradictions are not easily resolved. The tragic identities of men of special qualities and of high estate fail to engage the new social atmosphere. Osofisan's criticism of Soyinka's untransmuted use of myth is apparent. Soyinka's tragic heroes are resolutely moralistic. They are outsiders,

²⁹ Berthold Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, John Willett, ed. and trans., (1957; London: Methuen, 1978), 58.

alienated from the pristine society of which mythical constructions assume to emanate.³⁰

Where Brecht tried to break myths by making his audience see above the emotive aspects of the drama, Soyinka involves his audience in catharsis. The pre-Civil War Soyinka addresses particular social themes in *The Road* (1965), in which he displays sensitivity for the underclass during the political upheaval prior to the military takeover.³¹ The mythic element still plays an important role in the lives of the thugs and touts. Fear of the unknown leads them to mythicise their own lives and that of their fallen comrades. However, the political element of corruption and party violence becomes simply part of their lives. Little resistance is made against these social, material problems.

Soyinka's early work included several agit-prop, 'hit and run' performances in public spaces. These works concerned current affairs. He created several sketches, of which a fair number were satirical in nature. This returns Soyinka to indigenous influences. The Jero plays and *A Play of Giants* (1984) employ a traditional form of satire.³² The true nature of self-important individuals is exposed to society.

Soyinka invigorates indigenous satire with other satiric traditions such as in *Opera Wonyosi* (1981), an adaptation of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* and Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera*. *Opera Wonyosi* and *A Play of Giants* are located outside Nigeria. The themes Soyinka deals with in the former play are with the social situation in Nigeria. In these plays Soyinka abandons the Ogun symmetry. Identity is constructed on the current social configurations, based on post-independence failings. Soyinka's themes remain the

³⁰ For comments on Olunde's heroism as not being grounded in a Yoruba ethic, see Wole Ogundele, 'Death and the King's Horseman: A Poet's Quarrel with his Culture,' in *Research in African Literatures*, 25.1, (1994), 47-60: 57.

insatiable appetite of humans to destroy one another. In *A Dance of the Forests*, Warrior indicts both present and past ‘Unborn generations will be cannibals... Unborn generations will, as we have done, eat up one another’ (Soyinka, 1984: 48). Soyinka reminds us of this prophecy. In *The Trials of Brother Jero* ([1964] 1998), Jero prophesies to a Member of Parliament:

I saw this country plunged into strife. I saw the mustering of men, gathered in the name of peace through strength. And at a desk, in a large gilt room, great men of the land awaited your decision. Emissaries of foreign nations hung on your word, and on the door leading into your office, I read the words, Minister for War... (Soyinka, 1998: 34)

In *Madmen and Specialists*, the opening scene is a gruesome casting of lots with human body parts as the stakes. Cannibalism reaches its apogee in the eating of human flesh and in Bero’s patricide to rid himself of the last vestige of his humanity. Rather than a lessening of this phenomenon, we see its acceleration as Nigeria’s petrol-fuelled economy incorporates an increasing number of people into its modern urban-driven sphere. The majority of these people live in poverty. The rural continues to be a space of pristine locations but its importance as a site for regeneration is undermined by the emphasis on the urban areas. Soyinka follows this trend, exposing the neocolonial links that are responsible for social breakdown in Africa.

I now wish to see the new identity formations as they arise in two post-Civil War plays. *Madmen and Specialists* is an absurdist drama based in a war environment. War opens a wide space for human identities to reform. Soyinka’s Bero reflects one type of identity

³¹ See Biodun Jeyifo, *The Truthful Lie*, (London: New Beacon, 1985), 11-22.

that arises out of the moral vacuum of war. *A Play of Giants*, also a non-mythic work, uses satire not only to define the type of rulers in power but how neocolonialism is implicated as an international form of indirect rule, and how it affect Africans and Africa as a whole.

Madmen and Specialists

Madmen and Specialists (1971)³³ was Soyinka's first play after his release from incarceration, after the Nigerian Civil War.³⁴ Bero represents the power-hungry leaders arising out of the aftermath of the war. Shorn of humanity, he keeps his father a prisoner of the state as he tries unsuccessfully to uncover the secret of controlling people through the existential philosophy of 'As'. A cannibal, Bero knows no boundaries of taboo and in the end commits patricide. Set in an existentially absurd mode, *Madmen* deals with several themes: the nation and individual in conflict, class division, urban and rural dichotomy, breakdown of the family unit, greed of the national elite and the Civil War.

Madmen depicts a failed national project after a war, and the dehumanising effects on individuals. The grand narratives of the nation-state; shown to be false in *Dance through the Gathering of the Tribes*; unravels. Soyinka uses absurdist drama to comment on the existentiality of evil. Independence is a poisoned chalice, 'the last disastrous battle that ends a war and makes peace itself an ill beyond all remedy' (Camus, 1960: 278). The binding properties of myth unravel within the wider space of the nation-state. We see instead the consequences of the nation's inability to cope with modernity in the absence

³² Kerr, 14.

³³ All references to the 1998 edition.

of a mythical foothold. The blighted setting connotes an absence of place in which the identities can inscribe self-authenticating signs and symbols that represent indigenous civilisation. Apart from the Earth Mothers and their ward Si Bero, all the characters have undergone profound shifts in identity caused by the war. From Old Man and Bero to the mendicants, fundamental change reduces their faith in humanity.

Bero, a doctor by profession has gone to participate in an unnamed war, shortly to be followed by his father, Old Man. He returns home secretly with Old Man in tow as his prisoner. While at war, Bero undergoes a climacteric change in profession and attitude. He comes to understand power as control over your fellow human: 'Control, sister, control. Power comes from bending Nature to your will' (*Madmen*, 247). Like Court Historian and Physician of *Dance* and the Aweris in *Kongi's Harvest*, Bero is of the intellectual class who collaborates with dictators by adding intellectual legitimacy to their governments. Bero's power lust is the reason why he leaves his doctor post to become Head of Intelligence Section, despite the fact he considers the superiors who appointed him 'submental apes' (*Madmen*, 247). Witnessing the effects of raw power in action, Bero seeks to refine it, to capture and distil its essence by discovering the source of As. As, for Bero, is a regulating force operating as hegemonic power.

The relationship between intellectuals and the ruling elite is a recurring theme in Soyinka's work. Intellectuals are shown as apologists for the ruling class, opportunists prepared to debase themselves for personal gain. Soyinka ridicules this tendency in

³⁴ 'Madmen and Specialists' was probably conceived while Soyinka was in prison during the Nigerian civil war'. Etherton, 245.

Opera Wonyosi, where the intellectual class falls in line with society's moral decay instead of forming a bulwark against it. From Sartre's point of view you cannot have an intellectual 'without his being "left-wing"'. For, as Sartre continues, 'There are of course people who write books and essays and so on who belong to the Right... simply using one's intellect is not enough to make one an intellectual' (Sartre, 1968: 13). Those who simply use their intellect are 'theoreticians of practical knowledge' (Sartre, 1968: 14). Applied in Soyinka's dramatic context, the Nigerian intellectual is not a radical element of society but a purveyor of conventional wisdom. Rather than contributing to changing society, to paraphrase Marx, the intellectual describes its workings and uses this knowledge for furthering personal aims.

Old Man represents the resisting intellectual. Recruited to rehabilitate the war wounded, Old Man instead trains their minds to think outside of hegemonic practices. His free-floating existential philosophy, As, aims to deconstruct and destabilise the corrupt order developing among the ruins of war. For this treasonable act, Old Man is incarcerated and handed over to Bero who seeks to extract from him the meaning of this new philosophy. Bero has witnessed its potential to influence minds in a way that threatens the ruling rank; it is dangerous for the dispossessed to think.³⁵

Father's assignment was to help the wounded readjust to the pieces and remnants of their bodies. Physically. Teach them to make baskets if they still had fingers. To use their mouths to ply needles if they had none, or use it to sing if their vocal cords had not been shot away. Teach them to amuse themselves, make something of themselves. Instead he began to teach them to think, think, THINK! Can you picture a more treacherous deed than to place a working mind in a mangled body? (*Madmen*, 253)

³⁵ See Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (1970; New York: Continuum, 1993).

The Mendicants represent the foot soldiers of the war. Disabled, they depend on begging and on the promises and scraps that Bero provides. Their disability is not just physical, for they are bystanders in the politics of the nation for which they have sacrificed their limbs to ensure its survival. Their penury holds them hostage morally to the highest bidder. They function as a chorus in the play, commenting on the social environment that creates monsters like Bero. They playact the inequalities and lack of social justice that the war fails to modify. They portray the new military elite as vultures, feeding off the carrion that is the nation left behind by the corrupt political class. Aafaa expatiates:

In a way you may call us vultures. We clean up after the mess made by others. The populace should be grateful for our presence. (*He turns slowly round.*) If there is anyone here who does not approve us, just say so and we quit. (*His hand makes the motion of half-drawing out a gun.*) I mean, we are not here because we like it. We stay at immense sacrifice to ourselves, our leisure, our desires, vocation, specialization, etcetera, etcetera. The moment you say, Go, we ... (*He gives another inspection all round, smiles broadly and turns to the others.*) They insist we stay.
(*Madmen*, 227)

This reminds us of the stock excuse given by the military when they intervene in national affairs. Their illegitimate mandate requires force and conniving with civilians to maintain power. Their atrocities, however, outdo those of the political class. The mendicants recognise this but theirs is a culture of survival. In *The Road* (1965),³⁶ the touts who hang around the store are the underclass whose social and political consciousness is limited by their need to survive in a modern cash economy that remains heavily dependent on the traditional client patronage system. Chief-in-Town hires them to act as his bodyguards at

a party meeting. Say Tokyo Kid, their leader is versed in the politics at the level it has descended to:³⁷

CHIEF: I need ten men.

SAY T.: Today?

CHIEF: This moment. Didn't you get my message?

SAY T.: No.

CHIEF: I sent my driver. He said he gave it to an old man in a black tuxedo.

SAY T.: That would be Professor. He don't like us doing this kinra job. Well, what's cooking Chief? Campaign?

CHIEF: No. Just a party meeting.

SAY T.: Oh. Are we for the general party or...

CHIEF: You know me, Personal Bodyguard.

SAY T.: Chief-in-Town!

(*The Road*, 1984: 168)

Chief-in-Town needs the toughest men because the meeting 'is going to be hot' (*The Road*, 169). This kind of politics justified military intervention. But the military use the poverty of the masses to strengthen their grip on power. Aafaa is conscious of this, and its relation to his desperate situation. Although he is susceptible to the social hierarchy, he

³⁶ All references from the 1984 edition.

³⁷ For a Marxist reading of *The Road*, see Biodun Jeyifo, *The Truthful Lie: Essays in a Sociology of African Drama*, (London: New Beacon Books, 1985), 11-22.

thinks he is better than the other mendicants,³⁸ Aafaa challenges Si Bero and Bero. He confronts Bero to make good on his promise to reward them for spying on the house and keeping Old Man hidden away from Si Bero. Collectively the Mendicants comprise emerging political awareness that might develop into organised resistance. Bero prevents Old Man from teaching the Mendicants about As, because it might help facilitate political consciousness. In the playacting scenes, the Mendicants analyse and conclude that the state is not on their side. Blindman comments: 'When things go wrong it's the lowest who get it first' (*Madmen*, 229). They are not oblivious to Bero's nature. Nevertheless, they work for Bero because he is their means of sustenance. Old Man tries to make them think for themselves through As. While they do not comprehend fully its meaning, they are conscious of its potency as a discourse³⁹ that reaches after the unattainable in a constricting society that confines people to their social positions. As marginal figures of the nation-state (and its manifestation as a nation protecting its sovereignty through war) their very presence occasions their absence at the centre of power. In Bero's ideology of power, they are peripheral to its processes, required as only cannon fodder.

Old Man elaborates the doctrine of As.⁴⁰ The centrality of As lends the play its absurdity and existentialism. As explains the position of humans in the cosmos and in the material world, typified by Old Man's pronouncement: 'Simply simply, do I not know you Man like me?' (*Madmen*, 288) As relates to fate as a universal constant binding together all

³⁸ *Madmen*, 229. The class structure within the poor is the subject of study in Peter Gutkind's essay, 'The View from Below: Political Consciousness of the Urban Poor in Ibadan,' in Oshomha Imoagene, ed., *The Nigerian Class Structure*, (Nigeria: Evans Bros, 1989), 140-179.

³⁹ In the same way that Say Tokyo Kid and the layabouts recognise the potency of Professor's 'Word' in *The Road*.

⁴⁰ *Madmen*, 287-8.

humans, irrespective of rank. It exposes the absurdity of Bero's rationalistic search for absolute power, one that he wishes to appropriate for personal gain.

Though the system designs a thousand disguises it cannot hide the fact that oppressed and oppressor alike are human. It can make a thousand distinctions between classes, but it remains at source mere tautology, of the type intellectuals like Bero are enlisted to create. Those who question the social structure are 'heresiarchs'. The state is structured towards providing for its few beneficiaries. They must maintain the existing structure at all cost and enlist the very people they deny presence to justify their right to leadership, for without them they cannot employ power. Old Man's project of subversion is based simply on undermining meaning as it is accepted in the hegemonic state. He understands that 'language is not the neutral tool of an honest desire to tell the truth... but an instrumental tool for constructing history and inventing realities' (O' Gorman, 1961: 122). The crux of the play's existentialism lies in the way signs and symbols are released from their associations in the logic of a 'sanctioned' syntax. Eldred Jones comments:

It is the words, continually fading away into new meanings, elusive, slippery, which keep the play alive. The very slipperiness of words is significant. It is one of the themes of the play – the total unreliability of manifestos, promises, laws, indeed all that society is supposed to be based on. In this slippery world, even breaches of faith can become manifestos (Jones, 1983: 110).

Having changed profession from a doctor to a state agent, Bero makes the transition to become a cannibal. But this is not enough. To erase his human past he commits patricide. Bero completes his metamorphosis into a monster and master of his own destiny. The act of patricide is a decisive break from the past to stand alone within the limits of his

humanity. Bero can now construct his own myth of power, one that will expand his human limitations to godlike proportions. Locked within a decision over who to shoot between Iya Agba who will burn the store of herbs and Old Man who is going to 'operate' on a Mendicant to see 'what makes a heretic tick' (*Madmen*, 293), Bero shoots his father. Iya Agba uses the opportunity to set the store alight so that Bero will not appropriate their knowledge. Bero's choice signifies that he will have no need of the earth mother's knowledge since he has the power of force. It is in killing his father that Bero completes his transition.

In *Madmen*, Soyinka unveils the aberrant will. Bero represents the breed of military that govern the nation. The complacent resort to violence, the absence of morals and the lust for power are themes dealt with already in *Kongi's Harvest*. The civil war experience and Soyinka's own incarceration influence *Madmen's* existentialism. The civil war represents Soyinka's shift in theatrical direction from the mythical themes, adapting the absurdism of Beckett to convey Nigeria's own holocaust. Bero is only a military technocrat. The submental apes in power were to be satirised by Soyinka in *A Play of Giants*.

A Play of Giants

Soyinka continues his scrutiny of power in *A Play of Giants* (1984), by using satire to expose the depravity of military dictators. The four leaders, Benefacio Gunema, Emperor Kasco, Field-Marshal Kamini and General Barra Tuboum represent Africa's despots at their worst. The action takes place in the embassy to the United Nations of the fictional Bugara in New York. The power of post-independence rulers is derived from their role as middlemen for the world's superpowers. During the Cold War these leaders were courted

and supported by Western nations and Soviet Russia in the struggle for ideological influence and economic advantage. Indirect rule manifests itself in this neocolonial relationship. Soyinka implicates these foreign powers and the sequacious intellectual class who support these regimes as a matter of ideology, or by their fixation on power.

The excesses of despotic characters in Soyinka; *Mata Kharibu*, *Kongi*, *Bero*; reach their nadir in *Giants*.⁴¹ In the other plays, the despots are educated. They are locked in a cultural conflict between tradition and modernity. They are faced with either individual or organised resistance. The opposition is made up of people they have or have had relations with. Segi is Kongi's former lover; Old Man is Bero's father. Both tyrants are revealed to have been better men. Philosophical and spiritual issues surrounding the nature of acquiring power are also addressed, which are absent in *Giants*. In satiric mode, Soyinka provides no redeeming past, for satire works best in the present with identifiable people and the enlargement of their moral failings.⁴² Also, as the nation moves further into modernity, so it loses its past and with it the traditional checks and balances on power that operate through myth. Soyinka's intention is to invite moral outrage through disgust at these illiterate despots and their appeasers. In the earlier *Opera Wonyosi* (1977), Soyinka exposes the corrupt underbelly of society where the distinction between professional criminals and the ruling class is semantic. Everyone is importunate to the ruling power, which surrounds itself in its own banal myths. A total collapse of values transpires, replaced by moral relativity. The power relations formed by this relativity erase the divisions between order and disorder, law enforcer and lawbreaker. The

⁴¹ All references to the 1999 edition.

breakdown of recognisable codes operates on the characters and their social relations, leaving moral relativity to operate in a vacuum of national proportions. Society follows the examples of its corrupt leaders.

In the preface to the play, titled 'On the Heroes of our Time: Some Personal Notes', Soyinka outlines his project. He admits, 'Unlike many commentators on power and politics, I do not know how monsters come to be, only that they are, and in defiance of place, time and pundits' (*Giants*, 3). Still he wonders as to the genesis of this phenomenon:

The puzzle which persists is why some, but not others, actually enjoy, indeed *relish* the condition of power, why certain individuals would rather preside over a necropolis than not preside at all, why, like the monkey in the folk tale, some would rather hold on to the booty of power through the gourd's narrow neck than unclench the fist and save themselves. (*Giants*, 5)

That such 'Giants' can assume the highest office and remain there through unscrupulous means is clearly stated by Soyinka. The independent African state is a neocolonial state, its affairs run according to the interests of foreign powers and their ideologies. It is in their interests that African leaders cannot run a contrary agenda.⁴³ Mpalive Msiska comments:

The play sets African political power in the global context of Cold War politics in which most regimes were pawns, and often willing ones, in an agenda far removed from the concerns of their own people and one in which an obviously amoral dictator such as Idi Amin was not short of friends, having been supported

⁴² Arthur Pollard, *Satire*, (London: Methuen, 1970). Soyinka's satirical plays can be seen as belonging to the tradition of 'moral repudiation'. See Femi Folorunso, 'Blight on the Landscape: Nigeria's Military in Soyinka's *Jero*'s *Metamorphosis* and *Opera Wonyosi*,' in Oyin Ogunba, ed., *Soyinka: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 127-151.

⁴³ *Giants*, 4.

by Britain, America and the Soviet Union, as well as the Organisation of African Unity. (Msiska, 1998: 21-2)

While the post-independence problems that disillusioned Nigerian writers' remains of primary concern over a decade after colonial rule, Soyinka indicts international complicity. Soyinka also implicates the use of race ideology to hide the real conditions of people's lives. He shows how an ideology of racial pride becomes an ideology of oppression,⁴⁴ and the limitations of anti-colonialism, with its privileging of race. Like capitalism and communism, race ideology is another totalising creed, at odds with the lived experience of the masses. The Russian and American delegates compete for Kamini's attention. African and Diasporic intellectuals lend him their support, claiming that Kamini uplifts the black race and defends African culture against the prejudiced Western media.

Even though Soyinka claims ignorance, he analyses broadly the underlying structures that allow for psychopaths to attain power. A. C. Grayling's definition of power proves useful:

Power's tendency to corrupt is a function of the work it does in liberating man's worst characteristics. A man feels his power over another more acutely when he breaks the other's spirit than when he wins his respect. To have power over others is to be in a position to deprive them of choices and options, to bend them to one's will, to make use of them. (Grayling: 2001: 12)

⁴⁴ The same is done in Patrick Taylor, *The Narrative of Liberation: Perspectives on Afro-Caribbean Literature, Popular Culture and Politics*, (New York: Cornell UP, 1989), 3-4. See Cabral, 51.

By ridiculing these power-hungry despots, Soyinka identifies the root of power corruption in the will to dominate others. This domination comes not in the Gramscian sense of hegemony but through coercion, power in its raw state, as Grayling's definition suggests. Like Kongi and Bero, the dictators of *Giants* return us to the fickle-minded despotism of Mata Kharibu and even worse.

In the opening scene, the despots pose for a sculpture, a grotesque life-size piece for Madame Tussaud's new Africa section. The leaders engage in a perverse dialectic of power that reveals the limitations of their designs in office – to retain power for as long as possible through any means imaginable.⁴⁵ Dissent is dealt with ruthlessly. Kamini, the crudest, most child-like⁴⁶ and therefore the most dangerous, links subversives to imperialist plots against him.⁴⁷ Yet it is imperialist nations that prop up his regime. Kamini's pantophobia breeds in him a suspicion of intellectuals or any one who holds a contrary opinion. He cannot be less intelligent than his underlings. His misology takes this a step further. Political power equals absolute power, echoing Kwame's Nkrumah's dictum to first seek the political kingdom. After that, anything is possible. Kamini sets the benchmark for intelligence in his country. Marx and Engels state that 'the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas' because by controlling the material forces in society they also control 'the means of mental production' (Marx and Engels, [1845-6] 1963: 39). As power-in-itself, Kamini can never be wrong. As such, the level of

⁴⁵ *Giants*, 11-14.

⁴⁶ B. M. Ibitokun says, 'His substandard language- the idioms of the others are equally inept- is an aspect of his imbecility. He is a child who is yet to be socialised linguistically. The rules of syntax, morphology and lexis have yet to be mastered by him'. See B. M. Ibitokun, 'Villainy and Psychopathology: Wole Soyinka and Political Power,' in Oyin Ogunba, ed., *Soyinka: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 64-88: 84.

⁴⁷ *Giants*, 13.

intelligence in society contracts to the point where one constantly tries to be on the right side of the despot.⁴⁸

The base dialectic of power among the leaders includes the merits of voodoo in politics and cannibalism as a means of attaining total power.⁴⁹ Cannibalism is Soyinka's recurring metaphor for the inhumanity residing in individuals. We see it prophesied in *Dance* and actualised in *Madmen*. The despots identify with the colonial masters as heroes. Kasco idolises Napoleon and models himself as an emperor, placing himself above politics.⁵⁰ Gunema idolises Franco. Kamini on the other hand traces his ancestry to Chaka.⁵¹ In mythicising themselves they place themselves above reproach and above their nations. In an ironic gesture, Soyinka comments on the propensity of Negritude to delve into the past to create an African golden era⁵² and how it can be misapplied, as he shows in *Dance*.⁵³

Soyinka comments on the diverse nature of colonial administrative policy in British indirect rule and French assimilation. Kasco, like his earlier incarnation Emperor Boky in *Opera Wonyosi*, considers himself to be a child of Napoleon since he himself is a Frenchman, following on from the French colonial policy of assimilation. By modelling themselves on colonial figures, they also model the law and order type of colonial

⁴⁸ Soyinka quotes the experience of Ugandan writer, Robert Serumaga: 'At the start... you more or less knew what to do and what to avoid if you wanted to stay alive. You knew when to speak, when to shut up and what to say or not say. Now there are no longer any rules. What saved you yesterday turns out to be your death warrant today' (*Giants*, 8).

⁴⁹ *Giants*, 29-30.

⁵⁰ *Giants*, 31.

⁵¹ *Giants*, 21-2.

⁵² Okpewho, 1998: 1.

⁵³ The celebrants of the Gathering of the Tribes request from the ancestor world heroes to grace the occasion. Instead they are sent accusers to remind them that the past cannot be rewritten as illustrious, as the nationalists tried to do

administration that was part of customary law.⁵⁴ In addition, self-aggrandisement, such as the love for titles is symptomatic of ‘political ritual’.⁵⁵ In *Kongi’s Harvest*, the Reformed Aweri Fraternity deliberate on these peripheral aspects of power as if they are substantive. In *Giants*, Soyinka leaves it to the despots themselves to articulate their relationship to power. Gunema gives the definitive statement of their preferred status: ‘Power is we. We have ze power’ (*Giants*, 20). And so Kamini does not have to undergo any transformation as leader. Everyone must humour his vulgar nature because he is power itself.

Kamini uses every opportunity to display his vulgarity. When the Bugaran Central Bank chairman advises not to print more money just because the international lending institutions have refused Bugara another loan, he pays for his insolence by having his head pushed down a toilet. The greatest punishment is routinely described anatomically in childish fashion. The sculptor jokes to Gudrum that the despots’ sculpture should be placed in the Chamber of Horrors. Gudrum, the Scandinavian apologist who is writing a book on Kamini, reports the sculptor. The vindictive Kamini, relieving himself in the toilet, terrorises the sculptor and has him beaten severely.⁵⁶

The Mayor of Hyacombe and Prof. Batey represent Kamini’s support by the intelligentsia of the Diaspora. The Mayor wishes to give Kamini and his fellow dictators the freedom of the city. ‘My heart is bursting with joy. All leaders who have uplifted us from the

during and after independence. Soyinka’s aim here is to move Nigerian historiography away from its binary formula and from its essentialism to focus on issues central to the common interests.

⁵⁴ O’Connell, ‘The Political Class and Economic Growth’, 7.

⁵⁵ Kilson, 387.

⁵⁶ *Giants*, 51.

degradation of centuries of conquest, slavery and dehumanisation' (*Giants*, 32-3). Batey, like Gudrum, is writing a book on Kamini. He has visited Bugara and cannot find any evidence of the atrocities Kamini is accused by his people of committing. All the problems of Bugara are due to external causes.⁵⁷ Soyinka puts the support of such intellectuals down to willed ignorance.⁵⁸

The tone, the varied disguises of their 'ignorance' left me with the confirmation of a long-held suspicion that power calls to power, that the brutality of power (its most strident manifestation) evokes a conspiratorial craving for the phenomenon of 'success' which cuts across all human occupations. (*Giants*, 4)

Soyinka likens this fixation to a master-slave relationship.⁵⁹ But this relationship is not in the Hegelian model. It is one based on the total subjugation of the Sartrean intellectual,⁶⁰ where power equals right unconditionally.

The climax is reached when Kamini, in disregard of international law, holds the United Nations' Secretary-General and the Russian and American delegates hostage after news arrives that a coup has been staged successfully against him. Surmising that the coup is sponsored by the United Nations and the superpowers, he orders the delegates to tell their governments to suppress the coup and, along with the United Nations, 'recognise Kamini as President for Life' (*Giants*, 80). Kamini uses weapons that have been smuggled into the embassy to attack the United Nations building and Bugaran exiles protesting against

⁵⁷ *Giants*, 34.

⁵⁸ *Giants*, 4.

⁵⁹ *Giants*, 5.

⁶⁰ According to Sartre, intellectuals on the Right are 'theoreticians of practical knowledge' that is applicable to the bourgeois state. 'What on the other hand defines an intellectual in our society is the deep-seated contradiction between the universality which bourgeois society is obliged to grant his knowledge and the particular ideological and political framework within which he is forced to apply it.' Jean-Paul Sartre, *Politics and Literature*, (1965; London: Calder and Boyars, 1968), 14.

his rule outside. Losing all sense of reality he attacks the symbolic source of his power, the world superpowers and the international community that has humoured him for too long. As James Gibbs states:

The arrival of the Secretary-General of the UN and of Russian and American delegates ensures that the position of the UN in Africa and the involvement of the world powers in establishing and supporting Kamini emerges. Forces outside Africa, Soyinka makes clear, had used Kamini as a 'tool' for their neo-imperialist designs: they enabled him to torture, maim, terrorise and slaughter 'his' people. (Gibbs, 1986: 157)

It is for this very reason that Kamini demands that he be forcefully reinstated. He is not that infantile to understand the neocolonial relationship between Western powers and African nations. Throughout the play, any reference made by the dictators to their own country is only how to suppress their people and avoid being overthrown. They do not have a mandate from their people and so they owe no allegiance to them. Their meeting 'regresses into a nursery-school-type competition over who is the meanest of them all' (Msiska, 1998: 23).

In *Death and the King's Horseman*, the colonial factor is incidental to the lives of the Oyos. In *Giants*, neocolonialism is linked directly to the identities of African despots. *Giants* comments on the neocolonial implications of power relationships between the ruling class and the neo-imperialists. Here Soyinka posits an African identity of corrupt leadership within material and ideological global relations. The oppressed share an identity of subjection to rule by whim. Soyinka omits the spiritual and philosophical framework of earlier plays. African identity is affected by power misappropriation of the

ruling class. These corrupt leaders no longer submit to the mores of their society either materially or spiritually. By locating the play in New York, Soyinka puts the despots in the place where their loyalties reside. Soyinka's criticism of the United Nations and the Organisation of African Unity reveals again his scepticism of the nation-state. These associations of nations join ranks with the despots until their positions become untenable. In this instance, power indeed, calls onto power.

Conclusion

Soyinka focuses on poor leadership as the major obstacle to an African humanism. But rather than mythicise the notion of proper leadership as he does with *Eman* and *Olunde*, he tackles the issue on an absurd and satirical level, allowing him to configure several identities that are instantly recognisable in contemporary setting. The Theatre of the Absurd dealt with the human condition after the mass destruction of two wars. A new kind of person, a new way of thinking was developing. For Soyinka it was necessary to point out the problems that were still hampering the growth of Nigeria as a modern nation before and after the Civil War. Oil wealth widened the gap between rich and poor, exacerbating social divisions. Soyinka intensifies the tension between these divisions to show them as arbitrary, pointing, like Brecht, to human agency as both cause and solution to hegemonic practises. For Soyinka the 'system', whether good or bad is impossible to control human nature. For just as Jean-Paul Sartre says you cannot be an intellectual and be on the Right, Roland Barthes shows that those to the Left of the political spectrum hold myths of their own.⁶¹

Soyinka takes account of contemporary society and holds up a mirror that reflects his own ideas. By doing so, he is very much part of the post-independence project of African writers who express the pessimism and frustration with their nations' failings. They continue to castigate the political ruling class to which they are culturally and socially bound for it is this group that is responsible for bringing the continent into the modern world. Their failings allowed a military unequipped to deal with administering a modern nation to seize power. The African elite then collaborated with them, leading the continent further back into underdevelopment. Soyinka seizes upon these issues to warn society of the nature of the ruling class. Soyinka illustrates not only the depravity of the leaders but also that of the downtrodden. He neither idealises the 'wretched of the earth' nor does he condemn them. By analysing the effect of power on subject formation, Soyinka castigates a society that allows its citizens to descend into immorality. In so doing he also alerts us to the possibility of change. Human agency is removed from the eternality of myth and Aristotelian tragedy, and placed in the everyday reality of a people and their (popular) theatre. Myth is seen as a force for bringing people back to their historical path in a secular modern world. This tendency of forgetting their past is what leads to cannibalism of the state and its people.

⁶¹ See Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, (1957; London: Vintage, 2000), 145-148.

Chapter Four

Identity in the Drama of Zakes Mda: Themes and Influences

In Chapter Four, I look at the themes and influences that shape Zakes Mda's unique position as a writer of resistance theatre. I look at the ways Mda's drama conforms with and deviates from his artistic and ideological influences and how they inform on his characters' identities. These influences were not only instrumental to Mda's dramatic development but were significant to black South African theatre in the 1970s in general. These influences were Black Consciousness, township musicals and the theatre of Athol Fugard. The intersecting of these key artistic and ideological influences development and the post-independent nation-state – provide a way through which Mda's humanism constructs a space for African identities in opposition to colonial and apartheid segregation and race essentialism.

The structure of this chapter differs from the last chapter where I paid attention to the influences on Wole Soyinka with regard to their mediating his traditional influences on identity formations. I begin Mda's study by looking at identity formations in South Africa with regard to race ideology, which I looked at in Chapter Two. We can only understand how Mda deviates from his Black Consciousness contemporaries by way of examining the structures of race-conscious ideologies of oppressor and oppressed alike. This way, we shall see how Mda interrogates Black Consciousness' essentialist approach to race politics. After this, I shall look at the following influences: Early Influences – Rural v Urban, Christianity, Athol Fugard, Township Musical, Theatre for Development and

The Post-Colonial Moment. A close reading of his plays with regard to identity formation follows afterwards.

Mda's drama, like Soyinka's, resists ideological rigidity in favour of an exploration into the nature of oppression. Writing in a politically charged atmosphere, where apartheid and Black Consciousness directly opposed each other, Mda's resistance theatre plots a humanistic determination of the issues and their resolutions as they are shaped by the Southern African experience. This is unique in itself: a South African writer writing from a regional perspective rather than from an expressly South African viewpoint, this at a time when racial politics in South Africa took a radical approach.

Andrew Horn locates Mda's dramatic 'perceptual matrix' in 'region, family and religion' (Horn, 1990: viii). Mda's concern is for how these effects work on ordinary individuals and their environment. Writing from a position of exile in Lesotho, Mda's dramatic themes remain informed by events in South Africa. Identity formations in Mda's drama emanate from apartheid South Africa's dominant relationship with Southern Africa in which the indirect rule-style policy of the bantustan is replicated on a regional level. The effects on Africans in the region are similar to those within South Africa.

Mda's humanism in the context of post-1976 South Africa is driven by the desire to position the subject as socially determined and therefore capable of change. Mda's position can be viewed through Mead's definition of the self as developing out of a social

environment.¹ As Marx put it: ‘The real nature of man is the totality of social relations’ (Marx, [1845] 1963: 83). Where Black Consciousness ideology seeks agency through an ‘anti-racist racism’ by espousing a racial essentialist ideology, Mda expresses individual autonomy as the starting point for true liberation, dislocating the invented traditions of ethnic groupings. Mda’s view is consonant with the ANC Freedom Charter. Social relations are interrogated to explain why after liberation, a race-based ideology fails to facilitate a ‘renaissance’ of African peoples and nations. In this regard Mda addresses similar themes of post-independence African writers.

Mda’s liberation aesthetic is anti-mythic.² His optimism and scepticism rest on human agency rather than in race essentialism and its attending myths, which distinguishes his identity formations from Soyinka’s. Soyinka’s idealists are heroes. Mda’s idealists are non-heroic fantasists. They are individuals, like Fugard’s, whose lives are caught between opposing ideologies. Fundamental to Mda’s identities is the primacy of social, material influence. Mda’s anti-mythic stance informs his negative view of Christianity and ethnicity, and his overall view of African identities. It provides a materialist exposition that seeks rational explanations for oppression and how to contest it.

While addressing the main themes of his influences, we will discover that Mda’s staging and writing reflect a commitment to conscience raising to effect change. The techniques of theatre for development form a political aesthetic for his drama. These techniques expose the underlying hegemonic practices and show culture as an open-ended enterprise

¹ Mead, 135.

for progress. At the same time they place transformative power with the individual rather than with the group, breaking the monolithic power relations of the Orientalist-style discourse that facilitated indirect rule/bantustan rule. In order to show this I will see how Mda uses his own interpretation of Black Consciousness to counter apartheid.

Contesting Ideologies: Black Consciousness and Apartheid

Mda's individuals in the apartheid state interrogate ideological and group affiliations through the reality of their material conditions. By analysing how the state and civil society collaborate to rationalise racial hegemony, Mda shows how these constructions alienate black South Africans from their true conditions. The counter-discourse of Black Consciousness and Black Nationalism for Mda contest insufficiently this alienation when rejecting apartheid discourse. Both apartheid and Black Consciousness generated ways of being, fixed identities and programmed responses through racial stereotyping. In both ideologies, the individual was identified with the group. Apartheid's bantustan policy divided the majority population into ethnic affiliations. In seeking to reverse this fragmentation, by redefining the term 'black', Black Consciousness fought stereotype with stereotype. By effecting this dichotomy, race became inextricably linked with class, although Black Consciousness tended to reduce class analysis in favour of race.³

Constructions of difference enhance the sense of power of the self over the other, where the former can direct the latter to fulfil certain ends to its own purposes. Control of the state apparatuses allows the dominant group to effect hegemony over subordinate groups in the

² Paulo Freire proposes that before the consciousness of oppressed individuals can develop into a class consciousness, 'they must first cut away the umbilical cord of magic and myth which binds them to... oppression.' Freire, 155-6.

³ Kavanagh, 160-1.

Gramscian sense. Where one discourse of power replaces another, the new relations to power tend to copy the former one – they serve the interests of the dominant group, as Fanon explains in relation to the national bourgeoisie.⁴ Afrikaner nationalism was deliberately created in order to build a racial hegemony.⁵ An ideology of race supremacy was germane to the control of political power. Racial solidarity had to be forged among disparate classes. African nationalist ideology adopted this path of racial identity politics, representing black Africa as an originally united entity. Racial identity was the mainstay of liberation politics by the PAC and the Black Consciousness movement. This was in contradistinction to the Freedom Charter of 1955 subscribed to by the ANC, a party representative of all groups living in South Africa. The Freedom Charter stated: ‘South Africa belongs to all who live in it, black and white, and no government can justly claim authority unless it is based on the will of the people... the rights of the people shall be the same regardless of race, colour or sex’ (quoted in Worden, 1995: 107).⁶

Similar to nationalist discourse, Black Consciousness ideology homogenised diverse social and ethnic groups. Race discrimination and disenfranchisement formed the locus around which these groups unified. But as the post-independence experience of other African nations shows, there is a limit to race-based liberation. For one, there is the re-emergence of ethnic particularity,⁷ which was noted by Fanon.⁸ The newly independent nation reverts to either one-party statism, as in Kenya, or federalism as in Nigeria, where the post-civil war mantra was ‘unity in the midst of diversity’. Both exacerbate rather than ease regional tensions since the unreconstructed system of administration (indirect

⁴ Fanon, 133.

⁵ Worden, 3.

⁶ Graham Pechey notes that the PAC and Black Consciousness were counter-texts to the ANC Freedom Charter. See Graham Pechey, “‘Cultural Struggle’ and the Narrative of South African Freedom,” in Elleke Boehmer, Laura Chrisman and Kenneth Parker, eds. *Altered State? Writing and South Africa*, (Australia: Dangaroo Press, 1994), 25-36: 28.

⁷ See Leroy Vail, ‘Ethnicity in South African History,’ in Grinker and Steiner, 52-68: 53.

rule) remains and operates through both these systems. The inability to resolve these tensions makes it difficult for a national identity to form, for they still hold a powerful grip on peoples' history and identities.

Given apartheid's strategies of fragmentation, Black consciousness ideology and its theatre offer race essentialism in a way that manages these effects into an experience of oppression. Workers, students and intellectuals based in the townships were the main constituency of Black Consciousness ideology and they opposed apartheid through their own experience, relegating the experience of rural areas and women. Mda recuperates these marginalised areas to complete Black Consciousness ideology. In order to do so, he depicts the effects of both Black Consciousness and apartheid on the vulnerable. First, he strips them and their environment of any social affiliation that signifies 'home'. As Bhekikizwe Peterson comments:

Mda's characters enter the barren Southern African landscape with little except their own sense of dignity and survival. We rarely meet them in their homes; instead we constantly find them adrift on personal and historical journeys... The characterisations hover between individuality and typicality. (Peterson, 1993: x)

The nation's landscape is integral to the study of identities of black South Africans in a land where their presence is constantly challenged as temporary and identities forced upon them: in the forced removals, in the family break-up, in the poverty of the homelands, in the single sex hostels. Mda conveys a sense of uprootedness and fragmentation in his sparse stage sets.⁹ Though his characters desire stability, Mda

⁸ Fanon, 90.

⁹ See Ian Steadman, 'South African Plays and Polemics,' in *Current Writing* 3.1, (1991), 202.

refuses to link his action 'to the sustaining mythical frames that underpin most liberation theatre' (Gorak, 1989: 481). These mythical frames underpin land ownership and the concept of the nation itself. It is their unsustainable nature that Mda is wary of, which is shown in his characters. They create personal myths within which they escape their plight. These myths are shattered by the reality of oppression, the realisation of which leads to consciousness-raising. Mda is averse to all forms of false consciousness, be they at the individual level or at the collective level.

Influenced by Black Consciousness, Mda however understands that hegemonic practices are easily couched in liberation ideologies, similar to Soyinka's understanding in *Giants*. Certain groups can still be excluded. Mda interrogates the marginalisation of the rural from the mainly urban-based ideology of Black Consciousness. His early influences show how apartheid and marginalisation by the Black Consciousness movement affect the rural areas.

Early Influences

Mda's birthplace, Sterkspruit in the Herschel District of the eastern Cape province was a place of desperate poverty. The district was a labour reserve, its land impoverished by soil erosion.¹⁰ The desolation of the rural areas is a recurring feature of his drama.¹¹ This early influence defines Mda's position as a writer of resistance theatre concerned with the rural areas. In Chapter Two, I specified the constituency of which Mda writes its

¹⁰ Horn, viii.

¹¹ Peterson, 1993: iix.

experience. Mda represents ‘the women and children who stayed at home and struggled to make the stubborn and barren soil yield’ (Mda, 1996: ix).

Resistance theatre sought to conscientize its audience, to create a political and social response that was essentially racial. Doreen Mazibuko observes that black theatre had to be political ‘as long as there (is) colour and race discrimination’ (Mazibuko, 1996: 224).¹² It was an urban, masculine theatre, for its themes reflected its township constituency. The masculine nature of resistance theatre is an effect of apartheid’s capitalist policy of labour and migrancy control, the Bantustan policy and segregation. Working in the mines, prostitution, crime, drunkenness and sodomy in the male hostels were causes of the break-up of the family system. By rejecting the masculine approach of resistance theatre, Mda also rejects the capitalist migrant system that left men in urban areas and women in rural areas, a situation that impoverished black South Africans as a whole. He rejects the false political and cultural autonomy of the bantustan and its subsidising of wages for white business.

The dichotomy between the urban and the rural created new cultures and identities based on their different experiences. Binding them together were the apartheid government’s racist, exploitative policies. Bernard Magubane, studying the city in Africa, comments that the endurance of traditional values in the urban areas was not a self-manifestation of

¹² See also “‘I Will Remain an African.’” An Interview with Maishe Maponya’ in *Theatre and Change in South Africa*, Geoffrey V. Davis and Anne Fuchs, eds., (Amsterdam: Harwood, 1996), 183-191.

a dual or plural society. Rather, it was a survival strategy caused by the economic and political environment.¹³

Studying the traditional *sefela* (pl.: *lifela*) form of Basotho song, David Coplan observes that the songs, rather than express the experiences of migrant Basotho men, are rather ‘part of an effort to maintain an integrated, positive self-concept despite the social displacement, fragmentation, and dehumanization inherent in the migratory labour system’ (Coplan, 1997: 32). The dissonance between urban and rural life creates this need to resist one form of identity in favour of another, even where both arise from the same social forces:

Crossing the Caledon river into South Africa thus symbolizes a conscious act of self-reformulation in conformity to *mtheto*, the culture of the mines. *Lifela* songs provide a powerful vehicle both for changing self-identity in the mines and for reconstructing an identity continuous with life in Lesotho upon their return. This attempt to maintain an autonomous and transformative sense of self is itself a form of resistance to the migrants’ dependent position in the organization of production. (Coplan, 1997: 32)

The rural manifesting itself in the urban through the migrant worker is a forced duality, structured by the same point of power, dispersed through a Foucaultian grid of distribution. The social forces that produce this power create an ambivalent and dyadic hybridity. The migrant’s customary rights follow him to the urban location, differentiating him from the township dweller. His identity remains marked by his rural affiliation. It is through network relationships that his presence in the urban area gains

¹³ Bernard Magubane, *African Sociology – Towards a Critical Perspective* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2000), 325.

any legitimacy outside that of the work permit, further privileging his rural ties. But as Coplan shows, the migrant remains alienated.

Mda represents the black Southern African's alienation through landscapes, whether they are cavernous hillsides for migrant workers seeking employment, (*The Hill*) or Edenic gardens for homeless ex-liberation fighters (*WSF*). The characters stand on the margin in an unreformed society before and after liberation from racial domination. In plays where liberation is yet to be achieved, characters like Soldier One (*Joys*) and Woman (*DVR*) struggle to accept the responsibility of their actions. This struggle at first denies community with their fellow oppressed who are already conscious of their condition, making stable grounds for identity construction a difficult task. Characters like Young Man (*The Hill*) engage in diversionary acts to relieve their isolation, quixotic attempts at creating a self-identity. Young Man's dreams of material fortune are formed around the sensibilities of the individualistic, acquisitive society. In *WSF*, Sergeant finds relevance for his lost leg by giving excuses for every snub by the black opportunists.

The city, site of the dominant black cultures, is filled with exploitative relationships. Mda exposes the social forces that create these relationships. Men like those in *The Hill* who leave the rural areas or Lesotho in search of work soon forget home and assume new identities based on the survival instinct needed to cope with the logic of the city. Identity transformation is subject to social material pressures. Fugard, John Kani and Winston Ntshona dramatise this condition in *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* (first performed, 1972).¹⁴ Sizwe Bansi comes to the city in search of employment to provide for his family in the rural

area. Since he has no pass, the law regards him as a non-person. He is caught during a raid and is to be repatriated home. During a walk with his friend, Buntu, he comes across a dead man, Robert Zwelinzima, whose pass is in order. Sizwe at first cannot accept Buntu's suggestion: that he uses the dead man's pass as his own. Sizwe is at difficulty to accept that the dead man is more of a person than he is simply because his pass is in order. He asks Buntu: 'How do I live with another man's ghost?' (Fugard, 1993: 185) Buntu replies that in apartheid South Africa, Sizwe Bansi too is a ghost:

No? When the white man looked at you at the Labour Bureau what did he see? A man with dignity or a bloody passbook with an N.I. number? Isn't that a ghost? When the white man sees you walk down the street and calls out, 'Hey, John! Come here'... to you, Sizwe Bansi... isn't that a ghost? Or when his little child calls you 'Boy'... you a man, circumcised with a wife and four children... isn't that a ghost? Stop fooling yourself. All I am saying is be a real ghost, if that is what they want, what they've turned us into. Spook them into hell, man! (Fugard, 1993: 185)

Even though Mda represents the groups marginalised by linear narratives, urban characters and conditions still figure prominently in explaining the situations under which oppression arises. Using a theatre for development mode within the well-made play Mda formulates a process for finding solutions. Woman in *Girls* lives and works in South Africa. With her experience of union membership, she conscientises Lady, showing the possibility for identity transformation based on critical awareness of material conditions. Although Lady is also an urban dweller, South Africa as the cosmopolitan centre is the dominant cultural and economic regional force.¹⁵ South Africa dominates their experience even more than the problem of food aid that drives the play's message of self-

¹⁴ All references to the 1993 edition.

¹⁵ '... By 1946 only 41 per cent of mining labour came from within South Africa's borders' Lodge, 262.

reliance. In *DVR*, Man explicates the reasons behind the psychological instability of Woman and Old Man; their dependence on the dominant ‘other’ for their identities as intermediates (collaborators) between the oppressor and their own people. But it is the prisoners – outsiders – whose revolt leads to the events that shape the conflict in their minds and Man’s decision to join the freedom fighters.¹⁶

Old Man’s ill treatment of the prisoners leads to their burning down his hut with his daughter inside. The prisoners are most likely from the urban areas. The reserves served as a place for the authorities to send political activists of the urban areas.¹⁷ Unlike the local labourers, they are politically conscious. By bringing urban defiance into the rural condition, the prisoners create the possibility of a national identity for the liberation struggle. The prisoners show their defiance through stubborn resolve, ridiculing Old Man’s authority and thus the authority of the power he represents. The actions of the prisoners serve as examples of resistance, which help Man to escape his destiny as Old Man’s inheritor. Man becomes the link between rural and urban identities. He shows that it is possible for the rural dwellers to contribute to the national struggle.

Mda highlights the link that exists between the urban and the rural, exposing their dichotomy in terms of the liberation struggle as a false one created by apartheid through native administration. Their distinctions arise from the manner of their oppression that divides families and reconstitutes communal and black relationships. The urban, as the space of re-constituted identities, is the site of nationalist resistance, while that of the

¹⁶ *DVR*: 60.

¹⁷ Lodge, 263.

rural is mainly that of opposition to indirect rule. By joining the two forms of resistance, Mda shows that rural problems must be addressed by the metropolitan struggle to ensure effective strategies for liberation and post-liberation. By doing so, Mda effectively privileges the urban as the main site of resistance. In sum, Mda contends that social economic forces bring about the rural-urban dichotomy. The poor must liberate themselves from these forces to actualise self-determination, which is why in Mda's theatre conscience-raising is a major feature. It also informs his attitude to Christianity as a sight of false consciousness.

Christianity

Mda deems the function of religion as alienating oppressed groups from their real conditions. Mda rejects Christianity not because he considers it foreign to Africa but as part of his anti-mythic project: religion obscures human relations from material reality. Through its moral order, where the spiritual supersedes the temporal, human agency is subjected by mystical explanations that prevent action against the dominant group. This view can be seen through Roland Robertson's definition of religious culture as 'that set of beliefs and symbols (and values deriving directly therefrom) pertaining to a distinction between an empirical and a superempirical, transcendental reality; the affairs of the empirical being subordinated to the non-empirical' (Robertson, 1970: 47). Mda himself was born into a Roman Catholic family. His father taught at the local mission school. In spite of the role of the Church in black education and the liberation struggle, typified by personalities such as Trevor Huddleston and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Mda views the Church as a hegemonic site of false consciousness. Religion becomes an exegesis for blacks to 'establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations' (Geertz,

1985: 67) through which to order their lives and bear oppression. This is in the hope of a better future that somehow will materialise through faith alone. Mda's view offers a Marxist perspective of religion as a superstructure of the state and as such a human construction of the dominating class. The structural position of Christianity in the state contributes to the interpellation of the subject in the society. Afrikaner ideology, through the Dutch Reformed Church¹⁸ preached its racism through what Max Weber calls the 'theodicy of good fortune': 'The fortunate is seldom satisfied with the fact of being fortunate. Beyond this, he needs to know that he has a right to his good fortune...' (Weber, 1948: 271). Here, the good fortune is that of being an Afrikaner which must be rigorously worked upon the minds of both black and Afrikaner alike.

Mda's opposition to Christianity again goes against the grain of Black Consciousness ideology. Most of the prominent nationalist elite had a strong Christian religious background because of the significant role the missions played in black education. A racialised Christianity, Black Theology, influenced Black Consciousness, as prominent members of the movement such as Steve Biko and Barney Pityana were staunch Christians. Black Theology was of African American origin and its major figure was Dr James H. Cone.¹⁹ George Fredrickson states that in South Africa, the Christian influence was due to several factors. Most of the movement's members belonged to mainstream interracial churches, which played a major role in spreading Black Theology.²⁰

¹⁸ For an insight into the role of the Dutch Reformed Church and its role in segregation and apartheid, see Allister Sparks, *The Mind of South Africa: The Story of the Rise and Fall of Apartheid*, (U.K.: Arrow, 1997), 152-6; 158-61.

¹⁹ See James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, (New York: Seabury, 1969) and *God of the Oppressed*, (New York: Seabury, 1972).

²⁰ Fredrickson, 200.

Black Theology principles were adopted *mutatis mutandis* rather than slavishly copied.

SASO²¹ believed in integration, where all groups contributed to the development of a joint culture, rather than assimilation into a culturally white dominant society. Before this could happen, black groups had to close ranks. This view of an interaction with whites in a multi-racial society differed from the Black Theology of Cone, who believed in a more radical relationship between blacks and whites in American society. Cone believed that whites were beyond redemption and that Jesus was on the side of the oppressed only, who would emerge as the final victors of a racial conflict. In the South African context, 'black nationalism was not yet a revolutionary black nationalism but rather a reformist pluralism similar to the moderate or mainstream version of Black Power' (Fredrickson, 1997: 204).

The South African version of Black Theology tied Christianity to its particular situation, appropriating Christ as a fighting God, rather than a passive edifier of theological absolutes.²² This necessitated the adaptation of the South African form of Black Theology. A critical reaction to Black Theology came from the South African theologians like Manas Buthelezi and Allan Boesak of the Coloured Dutch Reformed Church. They were wary of Black Theology playing the same role as the Dutch Reformed Church in Afrikaner nationalism.²³

A dramatic representation of Black theology is *Woza Albert!* (first performed in 1981), a collaboration between Percy Mtwa, Mbongeni Ngema and Barney Simon. Its Kentesque

²¹ South African Students Association.

²² Steve Biko, *I Write what I Like*, ([1978] 1987), 59.

dramaturgy, mixed with elements of vaudeville speculated on Christ's Second Coming occurring in apartheid South Africa. Christ sides with the oppressed, actively encouraging them to stand up to their oppressors. The play concludes with Christ bringing to life dead liberation heroes, signifying that South Africa's culture is formed by its fight for change and equality. Black culture is legitimised by a racial articulation of religion that counters the Afrikaner ideology of segregation and the attending coercion that enforces it.

Though his work is an existential inquiry into the social conditions of people under oppression, Mda does not single out abstract 'man'. He examines humanity in time and space of race and class oppression. He queries ideology, not the need for organised resistance. It is only by conscientisation to the material manifestations of oppression that self-determined transformation can occur. Mda's scepticism of religion is based on his tying its practices to a hegemonic enterprise, of Christianity as the spiritual wing of an ideology of oppression, which negates the forming of subjects in concrete understanding of their situation. The wariness of the South African theologians in accepting the more radical theories of Black Theology is synonymous with Mda's scepticism of totalising ideology, even if it is one of liberation.

Athol Fugard

Mda criticises Fugard's protest drama for lack of political engagement, but critics compare their work as emanating from the same artistic groove. Michael Chapman says Mda and Fugard are 'the two most literary playwrights to have adapted the black theatre model to their purposes' (Chapman, 1996: 361). For Mda, a clear division exists between

²³ Fredrickson, 203.

resistance theatre and protest theatre. Loren Kruger and Ian Steadman see the difficulty of differentiating between the two.²⁴ Fugard locates his critique on oppression mainly within the confines of familial relations,²⁵ a strategy similarly adopted by Mda. Fugard then elaborates this confine with a Camus-derived existentialism.²⁶

Based on the black, coloured and poor white (Afrikaner) experience of apartheid, Fugard emphasised 'bearing witness' as the objective of his plays. With the Serpent Players of New Brighton, John Kani and Winston Ntshona in particular, Fugard created a number of pieces inspired by real events. Fugard's own personal experience with the effects of apartheid on blacks came with his first job as a clerk in a Native Commissioner's Court where he saw the injustices of the pass-laws enacted.²⁷

Dramaturgically, Fugard brings into his 'township plays' workshop-derived themes with his black collaborators to add an authentic voice²⁸ to the black experience of apartheid.

Fugard's collaborative approach to theatre should place a more discriminatory analysis of

²⁴ See Loren Kruger, *The Drama of South Africa: Plays, Pageants and Publics since 1910* (London: Routledge, 1999), 155-156. Kruger refers to Ian Steadman's comments in "Theatre Beyond Apartheid" (1991, 82) to comment on the audience responses to protest and resistance theatre: 'Some theatres intent on "mobiliz[ing] the masses" were met with indifference by township audiences but welcomed by audiences at the Market and similar venues' (155). Kruger refers to the institutional stability of venues like the Market and the Space theatres, located in white urban areas, 'sustained by liberal capital, and the emergence of an audience that was large enough and legitimate enough - at home and abroad - to deflect overt suppression by the state' (154).

²⁵ See *Boesman and Lena*, *Blood Knot* and *Hello and Goodbye*, all in Dennis Walder, ed. *Selected Plays*, (Oxford: Oxford UP: 1987).

²⁶ Fugard had an interest in existentialist philosophy from university, where Robert Kavanagh notes Kierkegaard as an early influence. See Kavanagh, 63. Dennis Walder shows similarities between the lives and ideologies of Fugard and Albert Camus, the French Algerian writer and existentialist, to the act of 'bearing witness' to the fate of the anonymous masses. See Dennis Walder, *Athol Fugard*, (London: Macmillan, 1984), 5-6. On Fugard's use of existentialism in his plays of the 1960s, see Martin Orkin, *Drama and the South African State*, (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1991), 127-129.

²⁷ Walder, 1993: xix.

²⁸ Kavanagh queries the authenticity of the characters in *No-Good Friday* through a Marxist critique of the participants of the production. He finds the play a mouthpiece for white liberal values and black intellectual desires for inclusion into white society. He also queries the extent of the contribution of the black collaborators to the final product. See Kavanagh, 59-83.

what exactly is an Athol Fugard play. Nevertheless, the objective of this workshop approach was to testify to the inhumanity of apartheid.

Fugard's collaborative efforts were an attempt at relating to the oppressed of South Africa in an honest way. Since he had little interaction with blacks, collaboration seemed an appropriate method. Earlier plays, *No-Good Friday*²⁹ (first performed, 1958) and *Nongogo* (first performed, 1959) were also collaborative efforts, although they did not exhibit the technical skill and artistic inventiveness of *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* (first performed, 1972) or *The Island* (first performed, 1973). Fugard himself was doubtful of the political power his works conveyed.³⁰

Given Fugard's philosophical leanings to existentialism and liberal humanism, which place emphasis on the individual, the political vision needed to imagine the post-apartheid South Africa he desires becomes problematic. The circumstances of the period – of increased segregation and violent uprisings – demanded a political effort a writer of Fugard's philosophical disposition could not provide. Fugard himself provides a blunt estimation of his position in South African political discourse. In a newspaper interview in 1974 he says, 'I am a bastardized Afrikaner, a product of cultural miscegenation. I am a classic example of the guilt-ridden impotent white liberal of South Africa' (Fugard, 81: 1991).³¹

²⁹ Fugard's collaborators included Lewis Nkosi, Bloke Modisane, Corney Mabaso and Nat Nakasa. Nkosi records the experience in 'Athol Fugard: His Work and Us', in *Home and Exile and Other Selections*, (1965; London: Longman, 1983), 139-145.

³⁰ Walder, 1987:xxix-xxx.

³¹ Andrew Foley argues that the foundations laid by the liberal 'establishment' made possible the relatively smooth transition to majority rule in South Africa and that Fugard was a major contributor. The tenacity of writers like Fugard, in their belief in liberalism, kept open a space in which dialogue was possible. See Andrew Foley, 'Fugard, Liberalism and the ending of Apartheid', *Current Writing* 9.2 (1997), 57-76.

Mda opposes Fugard's philosophical underpinning: the representation of individuals caught up in the whirlwind of social instability resigned to their oppressed state. For instance in *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, Buntu tells Robert Zwelinzima: 'All I am saying is be a real ghost, if that is what they want, what they've turned us into' (Fugard, 1993: 185).

The oppressed shape their identities within the space allotted to them by apartheid rather than shape identities contesting it. Still, Mda acknowledges Fugard's political and artistic contribution to South African theatre. In the context of liberal politics of the 1960s, after the banning of the ANC and PAC, in which liberal organisations like the National Union of South African Students took up the mantle to speak for the oppressed groups, Mda says: 'A parallel situation was also developing in the arts during this period. The only theatre that was overtly political in South Africa came from the liberal pen of Athol Fugard. Fugard, in fact introduced political theatre in the western mode in South Africa' (Mda, 1994: 3).

But of the political content of these plays, Mda comments:

These plays clearly protest against racial segregation by depicting its inhuman nature. But these works have some prevarications in their depiction of the South African reality. The oppressed suffer in silence, and are not involved in any struggle against oppression. Instead they are involved in a struggle of how to accommodate oppression and survive it, not how to confront it. They are endowed with endless reservoirs of stoic endurance. The spirit of defiance that exists in the real life situation in the South Africa that we all know is non-existent in these works. The oppressed let oppression happen to them, and all they do is moan and complain about it, and devise ways to live with it. (Mda, 1994: 4)

Mda also disagreed with Fugard over the lifting of cultural sanctions against South Africa. In the United States for a production of *The Road*, Mda received a message from

Dennis Brutus to boycott Fugard's production of '*Master Harold*' ... *and the Boys* at the Loeb Theatre:

... [A]pparently in his talk at Harvard and elsewhere he had spoken against the cultural boycott of South Africa, in favour of what the liberals would call constructive engagement. As a result a boycott is being organised against him and his work. (Mda, 1984: 297)

Fugard had earlier supported the boycott but in the end felt it necessary not to perpetuate a silence of the South African situation because of possible adverse effects.³² This was a silence he had helped to break as his initial project, when he first came to Johannesburg in 1958 and experienced life in multi-racial Sophiatown.

Fugard remains the key artistic figure in Mda's work. Fugard influences Mda's dramaturgy and the shaping of identities. Both dramatists address the effects of oppression on identities, which are located usually within familial relations. Their characters are caught up in a stasis in which the construction of a fantasy world offers an escape. Fugard's Lena and Mda's Sergeant feed on dreams, which are punctured by their companions and by reality. They both use metatheatrical techniques that raise consciousness about the nature of oppression and how to resist or cope with it. Both writers portray identities of the dispossessed. In the absence of community, they try to create dignity for themselves. In keeping with his pessimism, Fugard's implying the possibility of a better social and political future fail. His characters are too isolated from politics to confront oppression in any meaningful, concerted way. Yet they are affected

directly by politics. This depiction has led some critics to perceive his works as non-political. Martin Orkin shows how some Western critics did not read any political message from his plays, seeing them as comments on universal conditions.³³ More discomfiting, 'Literary critics within South Africa as well as abroad also elect often to foreground narrow versions of interiority' (Orkin, 1991: 146). Still, Fugard conveys powerfully the effects of oppression on the human psyche and on human relationships. His innovative use of language, at a time when no South African dialect was heard on stage, his use of real testimony grounded his work in the particularity of apartheid society.

Mda's work, although operating within a liberation ethic, is similarly pessimistic. There is no note of triumphalism of the struggle. That there is a need for resistance is not in doubt. What Mda questions is the sustainability of liberation ideology and the nature of the post-independent state. In *WSF*, equality does not exist, even in death. Mda shares this pessimism with several African writers from Ngugi wa Thiongo to Wole Soyinka, who addressed these themes after independence. Committed to freeing the whole community, individual yearnings are kept in check. Nationalist re-invented identities stifle when they become hegemonic representations of oppressed groups, and when they use this power to appropriate the state for themselves. In this, Mda shares the same concerns with Fugard over politicians and their power to direct peoples' lives. But while Fugard's pessimism is derived from the situation of apartheid, Mda's pessimism is shaped also by the post-apartheid future.

³² Fugard supported this boycott but in 1968 he was to reconsider the issue again and to argue at that point against continuing the boycott – "anything that will get people to think and feel for themselves, that will stop them delegating

Mda retreats from Fugard by giving his characters a force of spirit that makes them unable to live with their situation rather than cope with it. They enjoin others similarly oppressed to make a change. In *DVR*, Man joins the liberation struggle but makes Old Woman come to terms with her past. In *The Road*, Labourer shoots Farmer, after being dispossessed of his property and his wife. After the double crossing and debasement a glimmer of humanity appears at the end of *The Hill*. Young Man leaves money for Man to bribe the clerks at the Labour bureau so that he can find work in a gold mine. With this conclusion, *The Hill* is similar to Fugard's work, in that though the characters become aware of the superstructure of oppression, they come to terms with it. They too become 'real ghosts'. Mda, like Fugard, is expressing how the oppressed form communion around their daily struggle. As long as they retain their humanity, hope is not lost. Yet for Mda, existence cannot be isolated from politics in an oppressed society: 'I have dismally failed to respond to the strange aesthetic concepts so cherished in the western world that profess that artistic creation is an end in itself, independent of politics and social requirements' (Mda, 1984: 296).

Irrespective of his criticism, Mda acknowledges the impact Fugard has made on his work.

In an interview, he says:

Only recently someone who saw my play *The Dying Screams of the Moon*, commented that there was a lot of Athol Fugard in it as far as structure is concerned, and so on, and I won't say no to that. In fact I think that I owe a lot of my style to Athol Fugard, by either reading or seeing his work. I created a

...functions to the politicians, is important to our survival. Theatre can help do this.'" Orkin, 127.
³³ Orkin : 146-147.

different theatre from Fugard, it was completely different, but still there was a lot of him too in the style that I used then. (Mda, 1997:249)

Through Fugard's work, Mda became acquainted with Beckettian absurdism and Brechtian staging techniques. In the same interview, Mda says he had never come across either Beckett or Brecht.³⁴

In effect, Fugard is chiefly an artistic influence on Mda. Mda adapted Fugard to realise a politically committed theatre against the oppression perpetrated by the apartheid state. Identities in Mda's theatre go beyond working within the confines of oppressive practices, eliciting sympathy for their conditions. Instead his identities resist the hegemonic practices of apartheid and act as agents of liberation, or become agents of liberation after realising the untenable nature of their condition.

Township Musicals: Urban Explanations

Although Black Consciousness influences Mda's drama, there are aspects that find their roots in popular theatrical modes. Mda's first writing efforts for the theatre were musicals when he was a student at Peka High School.³⁵ Of his early writings Mda says:

When it comes to the writing of the plays, I know exactly who and what influenced them. It was Gibson Kente. I was at high school at Lesotho. I used to read lots of plays. I read Wole Soyinka, Joe Orton, Harold Pinter and a number of other playwrights. But without really thinking of writing my own plays. Then one day I saw a Gibson Kente play called *Sikalo*, which was being performed in Maseru. At that stage I vaguely remembered watching a performance of the very first play by Kente called *Manana the Jazz Prophet*, a few years earlier, and it did

³⁴ Mda, 1997: 249.

³⁵ Horn, viii.

not have any impact on me. When I saw *Sikalo*, I was still at high school and I was quite fascinated by the fact that it was quite a terrible play. (Mda, 1997:248)

Black Consciousness theatre in the 1970s and 1980s was dominant mainly in the educated circles.³⁶ The lower classes of African urban dwellers preferred the more entertainment-oriented township musical, a mixture of gospel, African American jazz and local musical styles. Gibson Kente³⁷ was its major exponent. The themes of the popular musicals like Kente's *Manana the Jazz Prophet* (1963) centred on the family or on community issues in an urban setting familiar to township blacks. Stock characters like shebeen queens, corrupt policemen and *tsotsis* performed to melodramatic effect. David Coplan explains:

Equally effective was the expressive tension he (Kente) created between rhetorical exaggeration and the thoroughly realistic portrayal of the conditions of urban African life... Most important, it created a theatre of self-realisation, in which audiences could see themselves and their concerns brought to the stage in a victory of the human spirit. (Coplan, 1985: 208)

After witnessing the success of *Sizwe Bansi is Dead* Kente included more political themes in his work. It became necessary to do so because of the changing mood of his audience, which had developed politically especially after the 1976 uprisings. Black Consciousness began to gain a greater influence on the youths.³⁸ There was little alternative for Kente but to adapt to the new mood of his target audience. Between 1974 and 1976, Kente produced the more political melodramas *How Long, I Believe* and *Too Late*.

³⁶ See Kelwyn Sole, 'Culture, Politics and the Black Writer: A Critical Look at Prevailing Assumptions' in *English in Africa* 10.1 (1983), 38-84: 58.

³⁷ On township musicals in general and Gibson Kente in particular, see David Coplan, *In Township Tonight*, (U.K.: Longman, 1985). Kruger, 1999, 148-153. Kerr, 216-222. Kavanagh, 113-144.

Despite its conservative outlook, the township musical related to the political and social aspirations of its audience. Kente was a 'black capitalist, Christian' (Kruger, 1999:148) who was part of a rising black business community in Soweto that had been growing since the 1960s.³⁹ The musicals of the 1960s were 'fairly uncritical of apartheid' (Kerr: 1997: 219). The difference between the township musicals and the musicals produced by white producers like Bertha Egnos was that 'the stereotypes emerged from within the black township culture, and projected the warmth and solidarity of community spirit rather than merely the degradation of township crime' (Kerr: 1997:219). Kente's insistence on English language use broke down communication barriers and gave the lie to the National Party government's line on Bantu culture divisions.

Of Mda's plays, *Dead End* exhibits traits of the township musical. Charlie the pimp is Mda's least politically conscious character. He displays awareness of the colour problem; he is incarcerated for his Afrikaner boss Frikkie du Toit's assault on Tšeli, his girlfriend. Charlie understands that the reason he cannot gain suitable employment is because of his colour and this has caused his predicament. But unlike Mda's later characters Charlie shows no urge to address the political factors responsible for his oppression and is resigned to his situation.

Mda, like the township musicals, focuses on the family as a major point of identity formations. The prostitute features in *Girls* and *The Hill*. Mda's staging owes more to

³⁸ Kavanagh, 119.

³⁹ Kerr, 219.

Fugard, rather than the township theatre's stylised acting and singing used by Kente prodigies Ngema and Mtwla in plays such as *Woza Albert!* and *Sarafina* (1986).⁴⁰ The clenched fist and singing in unison influenced the Black Consciousness theatre of Maponya and Manaka, another feature Mda deviates from. In *WSF*, Sergeant and Janabari make an effort at singing for the nation: '*They stand together and then open their mouths wide, trying to sing. But the voices won't come out. In frustration they stop trying and sit down*' (*WSF*, 44). Mda and township musical both address the same audience, the oppressed. Mda's theatre is more critical of apartheid and shows how identities of the township and rural areas can move away from their stereotypes and become agents of liberation and development.

Theatre for Development

Mda's concern for the post-colonial moment coincides with his efforts at finding an appropriate theatre form to conscientize oppressed groups. Like his father, Mda was wary of a middle class take-over of interests and wealth after independence. A. P. Mda believed that the interests of the masses could be served only by socialism.⁴¹ As a voice for the masses, Mda realises that conventional theatre is too formal, with its well-made play structure, to effectively conscientise peoples in the rural areas. An alternative form of theatre is necessary to foster ideas geared towards self-sufficiency and to create a consciousness to promote relevant development activities, one that incorporates indigenous cultural aesthetics. To create a theatre for development is to create a theatre of involvement.

⁴⁰ See Christopher Balme, 'The Performance Aesthetics of Township Theatre: Frames and Codes' in Davis and Fuchs, 65-84.

For Mda, the problem is ownership of communication technology. The shaping of information reflects the social background and concerns of its owners. Mda cites the example of literacy:

Literacy is not only the acquisition of the skills of writing and reading, but the literacy content itself is part of education to mould a certain consciousness about people's struggle in society. Content by intellectuals who write in English, however relevant and politically "correct" it may be, becomes meaningless to people who cannot understand that language, and theatrical codes employed to convey that content. (Mda, 1996: 212)

Mda defines literacy in an active mode. Literacy is not achieved through a 'banking' system of instruction but rather as part of the development of a people's consciousness of their social environment. Paulo Freire states that in the banking concept of education, 'knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing' (Freire, [1970] 2000: 53). Mda's development strategies reject the banking notion by using culture as a tool for development.

In *When People Play People* (1993), Mda lays down strategies to put effectively theatre for development to the advantage of its recipients. He draws on communications theories,⁴¹ the educational theories of Freire, and the theatre practices of Augusto Boal, among others. Mda visited Latin America to participate in theatre for development

⁴¹ Gail Gerhart, *Black Power in South Africa*, (Los Angeles: U of California P, 1979), 130.

⁴² Mda studied for a Master's degree in mass communication 'with emphasis on telecommunications - television and radio' at Ohio University, U.S.A.

workshops. During the visit, he gained inspiration to write *Joys of War*.⁴³ Mda focuses on the production of viable and sustainable communication structures suitable to development strategies for the benefit of the target areas. The result is that the people, using these self-sustaining communications resource, are able to determine their own historical, cultural and social progress.

Mda at the Post-Colonial Moment

Exile constitutes a vital part of Mda's early experience. Mda lived in Lesotho at an early age. His position as a post-colonial writer is legitimised by his living outside South Africa in independent Lesotho. But the circumstances of his exile do not make him a writer of migrant sensibilities, like, for example, Salman Rushdie. The relationship of South Africa to the Southern African region is decisive.⁴⁴ South Africa is the dominant economic and social force.⁴⁵

Mda's exile in Lesotho placed him in a unique position to experience the effects of South Africa's economic dominance over Southern Africa. Yet his themes are determined by events in South Africa. *The Nun's Romantic Story* (1996), *Girls*, *WSF* and *The Hill* are all set in post-independent African states, presumably Lesotho. Reference is made to Lesotho's capital, Maseru, in *The Hill*. The plays point to South Africa's economic and political dominance in the region. Mda's attempt in these plays is a search for

⁴³ Peterson, xiii.

⁴⁴ Van Wyk, 36.

⁴⁵ See David Simon, ed. *South Africa in Southern Africa: Reconfiguring the Region*, (U.K.: James Currey, 1998). Samuel Mensah, 'Labour Markets, Migration and Lesotho's Economy' in Khabele Matlosa, ed. *Migration Development in Southern Africa*, (Zimbabwe: SAPES Books, 2001), 211-50.

community,⁴⁶ one that is insecure following the euphoria of liberation. It is in this search that his aspirations are the same as that of other Black Consciousness dramatists.

Mda's father went into exile in Lesotho⁴⁷ three years before its independence. The family joined him a year later. The senior Mda's choice of Lesotho was not an arbitrary one, as Mda explains:

But we knew we were not going to a strange land. We had relatives who had lived in that country for many generations...

Although my grandfather later drifted back into South Africa, Lesotho remained the land of my forebears. Perhaps it is because of this history that I have become a sentimental old fool about this place. My youth here was a rich one in the community of both exiles and locals. And there was never any difference between the two. We were one people. (Mda, 1999:75)

Mda's geographical dislocation from South Africa is minimal. He remains tied culturally and economically to South Africa because of the colonial cartography that divided ethnic groups without due consideration for their traditional boundaries. Lesotho's independence was a 'flag independence'. Colonial policy and white capitalist farming concerns destroyed Lesotho's self-sufficiency in agriculture. As a result, Basotho men became migrant workers in South Africa, subject to South Africa's labour and migration laws. This led to a fracturing of traditional communities and a growing dependency on

⁴⁶ According to Michael Green, 'South African writers, all too aware of the biased and fragmented versions of their history produced by institutionalised history writing and historiography, find that a central preoccupation with their work is, as Bessie Head puts it, "a search as an African for a sense of historical community"'. Michael Green, 'Fiction as an Historicising form in Modern South Africa' in *Writing and Africa*, 1997, 87-102: 88-89. See also Timothy Brennan, 'The National Longing for Form' in Homi Bhabha, ed. *Nation and Narration*, (London: Routledge, 1995), 44-70: 61.

⁴⁷ Lesotho, landlocked within South Africa, is a major exporter of labour. After gaining independence from Britain in 1966, Lesotho fell to military rule after only four years of civilian government. Predominantly Christian, the three language groups of Sesotho, Zulu and Xhosa are also spoken widely in South Africa, with English as its official language.

the South African economy through waged labour.⁴⁸ Given these factors Mda had to recognise the impact on South Africa on its neighbouring countries.

As Woman states in *Girls*: ‘...this struggle is not just South African. It is Southern African’ (*Girls*, 26). The dislocation of Southern African cultures by its settler population, segregation, forced dispersal of indigenous groups and appropriation of black labour created similar social and economic shifts that affected the indigenous groups and their identities. The destruction of local economic systems by capitalism irrevocably changed the course of the region’s history. By destroying the economic culture of the people, by ‘violently usurping the free operation of the process of development of the *productive forces*’ (Cabral, 1974: 41-2), South African capitalism negates the very right of the region’s majority to determine their own history. Since economic and social relations shape identities, this leaves agency to determine lives influenced by external considerations. Writing from Lesotho, Mda observes the pernicious effects of this phenomenon of historical change in *The Hill*, where the cultural values of the oppressed miners are determined by their incorporation into the migrant labour system.

Mda, like his fellow writers in independent Africa seeks to ‘account for the stagnation of postcolonial society, to focus on the parasitism of the African political elite’ (Lazarus, 1990: 20). But Mda focuses on the oppressed rather than on the political elite. In *WSF*, multinational capital and its local agents are responsible for underdevelopment and inequality in society. The effects are shown on Sergeant and Janabari who realise too late

⁴⁸ See Colin Murray, ‘From Granary to Labour Reserve: An Economic History of Lesotho’, *South African Labour Bulletin* 6.4, 3-20.

what is happening to them in the liberated nation. Mda views his critique through a humanistic gaze, thus like Soyinka and Ngugi he shows his distrust of the nation, and its inability to provide for the majority of its citizens. His exiled condition in Lesotho creates scepticism of a situation that might repeat itself in an independent South Africa. Here we find that, ‘nation and exile are inextricably bound in discourses of postcolonial intellectuals. Nation favours a language of collectivity and exile is narrated through individual experiences. While nation allows for consensus, exile thrives on dissidence’ (Rajan and Mohanram, 1995: 5). Mda’s political analysis does not escape the nation by offering a metaphysics of being. To do so would be to attach an ethnic explanation as an attempt at authenticity, or, in the Black Consciousness mode, to idealise blackness. Mda subscribes to the position held by Ngugi, that the only two tribes in Africa are the “‘haves” and the “have-nots”” (Ngugi, 1977: xvii). This is another distinction between Mda and Soyinka, who submits to the notion of African identities within an ethnic authenticity.

Black Consciousness theatre rejected ethnic/rural dramatisations because they were seen to legitimise the divisive Bantustan policy. Mda adheres to this principle, for to make a critique of apartheid through a nativist rendering of sensibilities becomes a task fraught with difficulty.⁴⁹ His characters bear generic names: Man, Woman, Old Man etc.⁵⁰ They are types, representative of the oppressed and their condition, yet individually differentiated by their material realities. Hegemonic power, residing with the white minority, gives them power to define the African according to the discursive practices

⁴⁹ See Nkosi, *Tasks and Masks*, 79.

that suits apartheid. In *The Road*, Farmer distinguishes Labourer as different because he is a 'foreign Bantu' and therefore can sit with him under the tree (*TR*, 149). Farmer has previously denied Labourer shelter because he is black. To Farmer, all blacks are inferior to Afrikaners, so he can determine Labourer's identity.

Mda sees himself as a post-colonial writer, because he is 'here, now, writing in a postcolonial era' (Mda, 1997: 255). Thus Mda attaches to the post-colonial a timely explanation, rather than a condition. Yet his plays, whether they are set during or after liberation, comment on the individual as being vulnerable to hegemonic practices, racial and class-wise. His post-independence plays constitute a continuation with the themes of the general situation of the poor under oppressive conditions. By reinforcing the Ngugian perspective of class division in Africa, again he shows how Black Consciousness ideology is incomplete by its privileging of race above other factors of oppression.

These influences that have shaped Mda's dramaturgy centre his identity formations in Southern Africa's social, economic and artistic developments. Rather than seek another alternative to hegemonic representations of identity, Mda works through them, positioning his characters in their social situation. Then, he offers a way out. Similar to Soyinka, he rejects the divisions placed by decentralised despotism. But where Soyinka writes through an ethnic idealism, Mda ignores its presence, privileging class as the way through which Africans can unite around their experience of oppression. This strategy sees culture as fluid, determined primarily by material factors. The effect is to 'de-

⁵⁰ See Carolyn Duggan, 'Things of Darkness: Character Construction in the Earlier Plays of Zakes Mda' in *Alternations* 4.1, (1997), 27-44.

essentialise' African-ness. By writing out of these situations, Mda creates his own unique theatre. It is to his most didactic play that I turn to in seeing how he rejects fixed identities while at the same time works to a committed plan.

And the Girls in their Sunday Dresses

In *And the Girls in their Sunday Dresses* (first performed in 1988), Mda puts in perspective the regional relationship between nations and individuals in Southern Africa. The material forces of society are shaped from without and are therefore inimical to the development of the post-independent state. The regional relationship has its effects on the individual. Mda explores the dependence of a post-independent state in a neocolonial economic association to international food aid through a personal relationship between Woman and Lady. The two middle-aged women queue for rice at a government distribution centre, at the mercy of fickle office clerks who are the girls in their Sunday dresses. Foreign governments supplied the rice as aid for distribution to the poor. Through their relationship of convenience, Woman and Lady come to terms with the absurdity of their situation and in so doing decide to take control of their lives.

From the opening description it is clear that Woman is Mda's mouthpiece. She is 'soberly dressed'. In comparison, Lady is overly dressed for someone queuing to buy rice. She looks ridiculous in her attempt to look sexy at her age. Their relationship is symbiotic. Lady needs Woman's food and in exchange shares the chair that she brought along because she is familiar with inefficient government operations that always entail long waits. But while Woman sees their co-dependency as a natural state of affairs, to Lady such relationship is caused only by necessity: 'I just want you to understand that hands

clean each other. You need my chair, I need your food. I don't want you to think that I am stranded or something' (*Girls*, 5). There is a sense that Woman would offer assistance anyway – she is further described as motherly. A 'high class' prostitute, Lady sees things only from the exterior and the material. She abandoned university studies to marry a well-to-do Italian chef who later on elopes with the housemaid. Thereafter, Lady becomes a courtesan. She wears heavy make-up to conceal the effects of skin bleaching, caused by her lack of self-esteem. Her vacuous excuse: 'We are not so selfish as to look beautiful for ourselves, you know. We do it for other people, so that they should have something to look at' (*Girls*, 9).

Woman works as a domestic in South Africa. She has a clearer view of the conditions that they face as an underclass, and that the situation is regional. Only a collective approach can resolve their problems. She has a past, which involves the same Italian chef who absconded from Lady. The Italian brings her to Cape Town and later absconds to take a job on a ship. Rather than dwell on the past, Woman works as a cleaner in the block of flats where she and the chef used to live. Her experience makes her self-reliant and more assertive. She joins the Domestic Workers Union to better her condition and that of her colleagues. She is unwilling to join Lady in flattering and supplicating the office girls as they go for lunch break or go home, leaving them unattended to. Lady blames Woman's impatience on the fact that she is not resident in Lesotho and is unused to such incompetence and corruption. The rice is loaded on to private trucks before their eyes, to be sold at inflated prices in the open market.

The play is not a direct critique of post-independence society through gender relations. Neither Lady nor Woman is a feminist in the fundamentalist sense. Their criticism of black men's penchant for dwelling in the past is a critique of the myth-seeking aspect of Black Consciousness. They conclude that it is their responsibility to conscientize them. Sceptical of hero-worship and the way in which it can lead to despotism, Mda emphasises that active resistance is not the preserve of a charismatic few, as is the case in Soyinka's mythic heroes. It is this attitude towards liberation that has stratified its movements and left a self-seeking national elite in power. The attitude of the national elite towards the poor is what the office girls reproduce. Ofisiri displays a similar attitude towards the ex-soldiers in *WSF*.

The fact that *Girls* consists of only the two female characters, though they conform to the stock characterisation of prostitute and motherly figures common in African literature,⁵¹ is a deviation from the predominantly male characters of Black Consciousness drama. The concerns in most Black Consciousness drama tend towards male-oriented subjects, such as working and living conditions in the mines e.g. Maishe Maponya's *The Hungry Earth*.⁵² The two women for a moment consider black men more unreliable than white men, even though an Italian has disappointed both of them. In the end they recognise infidelity to be a male trait. The economic and social conditions make white men more attractive, as they can provide an escape from poverty. This feeds into the desire for women to lighten their complexion with skin-damaging cosmetics. Blackness is equated

⁵¹ See F. Senkoro, *The Prostitute in African Literature*: 1982.

⁵² Robert Morrell says masculinity is socially constructed and therefore is not a natural attribute in men. There are several forms of masculinity rather than a single universal one. As such, Black Consciousness promotes, inadvertently what Morrell calls 'hegemonic masculinity' which not only suppresses women but other masculinities as well. See Robert Morrell, 'Of Boys and Men: Masculinity and Gender in Southern African Studies', 1998: 625.

with poverty and underdevelopment. It becomes psychologically imprinted on Lady that she must change herself physically. With Woman's help, Lady realises that society conditions black men, hence the need for their re-education. Mda's approach not to limit their problem to a feminist critique allows him to show how various problems interrelate and affect the nation and the region.

Girls scrutinises the broken promises of independence. The play dramatises the aspirations of women to leave the country by marrying foreigners and the petty oppression of government officials. Mda shows how the nation's dependency has a similar effect on its citizens. The nation is incapable of developing according to a truly national culture, for its leaders are assimilated culturally and economically by the West and bound by a neocolonial relationship. This is not all down to their fault, for as Fanon observes, 'The colonial situation calls a halt to national culture in almost every field.

Within the framework of colonial domination there will never be such phenomena as new cultural departures or changes in the national culture' (Fanon, 1990: 191). Woman identifies forthrightly the regional scope of the problems that they face, as she tells Lady: 'One day it's going to dawn on you, and on the rest of all the others who think like you, this struggle is not just South African. It is Southern African' (*Girls*, 26). Not only is the political situation similar but the personal as well, through both women having relations with the same Italian. Politically, Lady sees Woman as an agitator, importing ideas that are specific only to South Africa's situation. She fails to understand how South Africa's problems are hers since she is living in an independent nation. She identifies with corruption as a national trait, which is why she is prepared with her chair. By accepting

incompetence and corruption, she is part of the national problem. By the end of the play, Lady is conscientized. They do not collect the rice they have spent days queuing for. Lady leads the way as they leave the depot, walking away hand in hand.

Mda criticises Christianity from the point of it being an ideology of false consciousness and as a luxury affordable only after material needs are addressed.⁵³ Christianity is seen as an escape route to Europe rather than a means of spiritual salvation. Here Mda ties up Christianity with Western economic domination and as a Eurocentric universalism, with Europe being spiritually and economically superior and desirable. Christianity essentialises the poverty of Africa and the wealth of Europe. It provides a dominant narrative for success in life through migration to Europe, marriage to a European and material gain. This perception of Christianity, as theodicy of good fortune, attracts the poor to see it as the way out and keeps them in check, hoping to be part of the chosen few, creating further divisions among them.

In *Girls*, Mda combines resistance theatre with theatre for development. By depicting the absurdity of waiting at the distribution depot before moving on to larger issues, Mda forces the audience to look at their lives, at what they accept as commonplace but should resist through self-empowerment. Only by revolting against these smaller problems can the bigger ones be addressed. Mda has spoken against urban-based liberal organisations speaking on behalf of people in the rural areas.⁵⁴ But as an urban-based middle class writer, a play like *Girls* follows this trend. As Mda's mouthpiece, Woman resembles the

⁵³ *Girls*, 22.

sloganeer common in resistance theatre. Still, *Girls* accentuates the need for newly independent South Africa to forego the way of other African nations by becoming nothing more than parodies of their former colonial masters.

Mda attempts to reconstitute national identities into a regional one by recuperating a sense of community, based on social and economic similarities of the poor. His characters are ordinary people who have developed their attitudes towards oppression socially and historically. Woman and Lady represent a group, but it is through their individual experiences that we recognise the need for community to form new identities. Woman's journey to a new consciousness creates the awareness of the regional dynamics causing the dependency on South Africa and the West. Her active engagement comes through her experience at work, which leads her to join a union.

Though Mda, like his fellow South African writers is searching for a sense of historical community, like Soyinka, he locates change in individual agency. Personal relations remain the space through which individual choice leads to communal action. The personal relationship between the two women and the Italian reveals an individualism that ignores the general conditions of race oppression. Woman follows the Italian to Cape Town where because of apartheid laws she pretends to be his hired domestic. She regards it as a necessary inconvenience for she is in love. She is not yet politically engaged with the institutionalised racism that impinges on their relationship until the Italian absconds. Her identity was formed by external influences to the extent that her own self is almost

⁵⁴ Zakes Mda, 'Learning from the Ancient Wisdom of Africa: In the Creation and Distribution of Messages', 1994, 139-150: 142. See Kelwyn Sole, 'Democratising Culture and Literature in a "New South Africa": Organisation and

absent. It is when she accepts her reduced circumstances that she engages with herself and seeks political representation through the workers' union.

Lady too is unable to see race as a problem. Living in an independent nation, her views are formed by the dominant cultures, which are in turn influenced by South Africa. Hence her using bleaching creams to attract white and black middle class clients. Both client groups identify with the Western cultural sphere.⁵⁵ Lady cannot see any other way of progressing other than through prostitution, which she gets her daughter to take up. In her middle age, she now sees her daughter as competition. Still she fails to understand the forces responsible for her predicament.

Devoid of any mythical framework, the women exemplify Mda's attempt to open new fields of identity formations within the underclass. Change is possible, but self-agency must first be acquired by thoroughly analysing the material conditions that create the present oppressive situation. It is then that a properly organised liberation movement can form. By showing how economic forces impinge on Africans on a regional level, Mda breaks down the barriers of ethnicity and nationality to reconfigure identities according to class. Mda shows that oppression is not limited to race and therefore, after colonialism, the struggle must continue.

Theory', 1994: 1-37.

⁵⁵ Paulo Freire sees this condition as an internalisation by the oppressed of the oppressor's culture and interests. See Freire, 43-47.

The Hill

The Hill (first performed, 1980) is also set in post-independent Lesotho. The macro-economic and social analysis of labour migrancy, family upheavals and apartheid show the effects of hegemonic practices on groups and individuals. They qualify how nations like Lesotho become suppliers of cheap labour for South African business and industry. Mda examines these effects on the psyches, bodies and relationships of the oppressed classes. *The Hill* is a gritty play on the dehumanisation these oppressed groups undergo to ensure survival, how it undermines an ethics conducive to human relations and, on a larger scale, nation-building.⁵⁶ By absenting ethnic associations – these characters come from their rural areas to seek work – Mda erases the fictive structures of invented traditions requiring his characters to seek alternative ways of self-agency other than through ethnicity.

The difficulties of creating alternative identities for his characters are exacerbated by their desperate situation. Once again we see South Africa's domination in the region and its pernicious effect. We also see how South Africa's problem becomes a regional one. Denigration begins not in a mining zone or in a reserve inside South Africa but within the capital of their independent nation. The migrants are trapped within the immediacy of everyday existence. These men are prepared to suffer humiliation to gain employment. Within the capitalist economy work provides them with status both in the urban and rural

⁵⁶ This points to Mda's scepticism of the nation-state. In an interview with Venu Naidoo, Mda says, 'I am not a nationalist. I see my self as a person of the world and I find nationalism rather inhibiting and destructive... It is a force that I am afraid of, be it Afrikaner nationalism or African nationalism... I don't believe in man-made borders because I see myself as a person of the world. But that does not contradict the Pan-Africanism to which I subscribe' (Mda, 1997: 258). Pan-Africanism, in this light, should be seen, like Negritude, as an attempt at recovering identities and rejecting those imposed by the historiography of an oppressive force.

locations. Every one around them undergoes the same humiliation to get, and remain, in work.

Young Man and Man, are at opposite ends of experience. Young Man's world is yet to be punctured by working in the mines and so he sees going there as unproblematic. Man has already been in the mines and knows of the degradation that awaits them in the event that either man is successful at the labour-recruiting agency. Man had saved money from his last contract to return home and set up a farming business that has failed, leaving a return to South Africa the only option. Though a realist, Man is also prone to fantasising, as an effort to erase the old unpleasant experience.

The need for something meaningful to define their lives leads them to make scatological comparisons. The idea is that the one with the bigger mound has had more food to eat. The food is obtained from the scavenged dustbins of the rich of Maseru West. Both are starving, yet they compete for who has eaten more of other people's waste than the other as a mark of superior status. Young Man boasts:

Two mouthfuls against nothing. And it hurts your pride. You don't want to believe that a young man can be ahead of you. You boast of your long experience in the gold mines of South Africa; but let me tell you, child of my mother, here in Maseru I am ahead of you. Two mouthfuls against nothing. *Two* mouthfuls ahead! (TH, 73)

This is what keeps them going, in between finding part-time work and dodging tax collectors. The rest of the time is spent dreaming of going 'to the land of the white man. To dig his gold from the belly of the earth' (TH, 74). Young Man and Man argue over the

status of gold mining and coal mining. The status is as irrelevant as Young Man's desire for privacy. Man points out:

Privacy! You will learn soon enough that privacy is a thing of the past. Your shit will have privacy at your home where you are a man. Where you are the father of your children and the husband of your wife. The mines will teach you a different lesson... We all shit in open lavatories there. Father and son together. We all wash in communal shower rooms. There is no privacy in nakedness. (*TH*, 77)

This episode expresses the breakdown of familial relations and the new identities shaped by work in the capitalist economy that sees people as factors of production only. This lack of humanity forms the consciousness of those working there.

Young Man fantasises about what he will do with his earnings after he has found employment. The car and sound system he 'buys' reflect the changing values and priorities between the urban/modern and rural/traditional societies. These changing values are created by Lesotho's economic dependence on South Africa. According to Martha Mueller, in her study on the effect of labour migrancy on power relations within the family:

The strategies open to women and men are determined primarily by Lesotho's relationship with South Africa. The former's extreme dependence – economic, social, political and psychological – has created a situation in which valued objects and the means of obtaining them are defined from without Lesotho. (Mueller, 1977: 155)

For Young Man cattle ownership is an outdated signifier of wealth. Rural/traditional implies backwardness, a lack of Western modernity and education. Young Man has

entered an economy where value systems operate with hegemonic structures that combine to interpellate the labourer for its own perpetuation. In his essay on constructions of masculinity in Southern Africa, Robert Morrell points out that, ‘The new masculinity incorporated work as a central feature of its identity’ (Morrell, 1998: 625). Yet this work did not cater for the majority and their societies. As Coplan has shown, Lesotho migrants distinguished between their work identities and their personal identities as a strategy of coping with the alienation of work.⁵⁷

Young Man would have his sister reflect his new status. He does not grant her request for money for school fees but instead brings her clothes, shoes and accessories as worn by women in the urban area.⁵⁸ Likewise, he buys cosmetics for his girlfriend. These gifts are intended to enhance his own status and announce his identity as a city dweller, which also marks him as superior to the rural people. This is a manifestation of the new masculinity formed by working in the mines and being part of a wider work-related culture. Because Young Man neglects his responsibilities his sister resorts to running a shebeen and so becomes the family breadwinner. Man shatters his fantasy by revealing how men in the mines earn the extra money needed to purchase these items – male prostitution. Young Man’s fantasising exposes the degradation men face in the mines, the new values they acquire and the negative effects that extend to the rural areas, a critique elaborated later on by Veteran.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Coplan, 32.

⁵⁸ *TH*, 79.

⁵⁹ *TH*, 95-96.

Mda uses sex to show how relations of intimacy reflect social imbalances, or are used exploitatively. Emasculated by the failure of his farm, Man has to accept his wife's infidelity. Absenteeism from home prevents him from carrying out his conjugal duties. He cannot provide financially or sexually for her. Prostitution and same sex relationships are rife in the hostels. Man and Veteran suggest that Young Man's good looks will make him attractive to rapacious men. During the Church sequence Young Man confesses to providing sexual gratification to a white man.⁶⁰ Exploitation of blacks becomes total because of the economic power governing race relations. Veteran, a newcomer to the hill, loses his money to prostitutes because his sexual desires overpower him once he leaves the mine for home. He repeats his mistake of first visiting the brothel in town and as always, ends up being robbed. On this occasion, he is also robbed of his trousers.

The female prostitutes are 'right cannibals of the female species' but not in the ontological sense of Soyinka's *Madame Tortoise/Rola*. They are forced to sell their bodies by the same social and economic machinery that force men into migrant labour. The culture of survival is paramount. Their predatory instincts, honed by deprivation, breach all propriety. 1st Woman recognises Young Man as her nephew. Her colleagues respond with the conventional wisdom 'Here in Maseru he is a man like any other man', and 'Yes, you can even sleep with him if he has money' (*TH*, 105).

Mda's critique of Christianity (Roman Catholicism *per se*) begins in the opening scene where a nun prays in what at first seems like a graveyard but is the hill. The illusion of the graveyard registers the nun as being only interested in the men when they can no

⁶⁰ *TH*, 100.

longer be exploited physically. This implies that Christianity has no relevance to their existence. Throughout her presence on stage she ignores the men when they address her. Veteran points out that she is only interested in saving their souls. ‘She doesn’t know that you exist’ (*TH*, 97) He continues with an incisive critique of religion in their lives:

Your present sufferings, your struggles to go to the land of gold... all those are things of the world. When you get to the land of gold – if you get there – you’ll find people like her. Representing their particular type of system. Only they, unlike her, are part of a system which strives to castrate us. They have been specially groomed by the white man to teach us that we are happy with our lot. (*TH*, 97)

The Nun’s silence is acquiescent of Veteran’s point. She refuses their request for a blessing. In the course of chasing a blessing, Young Man loses his food, which, literally, has been bought with his own blood. In order to survive Young Man and Man donate blood at a blood bank. The blood is not for use in local hospitals.⁶¹ Like their labour, their blood is exported ‘over the seas where it is sold to hospitals and other places which need blood’ (*TH*, 85). Life is literally sucked out of Lesotho.

Like in *WSF*, the oppressed prey on each other. The prostitutes rob Veteran. Veteran steals Man’s trousers, Young Man loses his crisps to Veteran and Man. Bribes are given to obtain work permits. The cycle of inhumanity is broken when Young Man gives Man money to bribe the clerks at the recruitment office. On a personal level, this act offers hope for humanity, that even in adverse conditions the poor can assist themselves. But it is an ambiguous ray of hope in the greater scheme. Young Man, Man and Veteran are locked within the oppressive state and show little determination to overturn the system.

Much like Fugard and protest theatre, this scenario ‘disapprovingly depict(s) a situation of oppression, but (it) does not go beyond that’ (Mda, 1994: 4).

Conclusion

Mda’s anti-mythic approach opens up liberation discourse to all groups excluded from its dominant narrative. In *Girls* and *The Hill*, the only distinctions are between the rich and the poor, the oppressor and the oppressed. Mda’s humanism and his other influences allow him to seek alternatives of self-discovery within Black Consciousness ideology. As he claims, ‘I do not even believe in manmade borders because I see myself as a person of this world’ (Mda, 1997: 258). This is shown in the two plays discussed. The effects of South Africa’s regional dominance itself reject borders. The only borders are statutory ones like pass laws for purposes of control, and so Lesotho operates as a Bantustan rather than as an independent nation. It is ruled indirectly by South Africa. South African hegemony enables Mda to advance his own Pan-Africanism, and enhances his regional critique.

The concerns for giving the underclass a voice have made Mda move into theatre for development, with an emphasis on communications rather than on performance. Such a pro-active approach provides an authentic voice for people to control their own representation. A platform is created for raising consciousness and promoting popular indigenous forms of cultural performance, thus developing a potent means of self-determination. It is done with a view to rejecting culture as monolithic; it is immediate, transitory and responsive to social and economic change. Mda works towards a practical

⁶¹ *TH*, 85-86.

approach to identity formations as constantly in flux. His characters are urged to create identities for themselves. They first recognise their social and political positions in society before seeking out the strategies for anti-hegemonic action. As such, Mda's approach sees identity and culture created in a continuum where static forms are synonymous with hegemonic representations.

In comparison with Soyinka, we see that the same Western theatre forms have influenced both writers. Mda's dramaturgy is influenced through mainly Athol Fugard. Fugard's theatre introduced Mda to many of the Western aesthetics incorporated in his theatre. Mda was also influenced by township theatre of the popular musical and of Black Consciousness. Soyinka's satires are influenced by the Yoruba popular theatre genre. His major work emphasises the traditional content. His universal humanism is based on a mythical explanation underpinning human experience. Mda, on the other hand, bases his own humanism in a more materialist exposition. Agency is acquired through struggle with oppression and it is from here that identity is determined.

Both offer a progressive view of African history through their different approaches, rejecting ideology as a way of fighting oppression. Soyinka's mythic approach is founded on the notion of culture as a fluid continuum, responding and incorporating new experiences and regenerating itself to cope with new phenomena. Mda offers a vision based on the daily struggle of the oppressed within a liberation ethic. This, for Mda, is what defines them as a people and thus enables them to form new associations without the need for the nation-state.

Soyinka and Mda approach ethnicity differently. This key distinction shows how colonialism in the shape of indirect rule influences their articulation of African identities. Soyinka uses his indigenous culture to create a modern identity out of eternalising myth. Mda favours class over ethnicity as a unifying force for the black experience. Race represents a much larger factor in Mda's thinking because of the nature of apartheid. Therefore we cannot discount the historical patterns of colonialism in West Africa and South Africa when looking at how these playwrights shape identities.

Soyinka and Mda seek new identity patterns through their particular perceptions, offering a uniquely African view of modernity and humanism. By addressing the individual in an existential space, they derive agency that refuses to lend itself to oppression, and to determine their place in the world through a paradoxical ethic of continuity and variation. This is why their influences are various and offer a multi-dimensional scope to the identities they present in their dramas.

Chapter Five

Representation of Women in the Works of Wole Soyinka and Zakes Mda

In this chapter I will compare the ways in which Wole Soyinka and Zakes Mda represent women in their works. This is with a view to examining how gender is conceptualised in the context of African identities through dramatic representation. I will look at the historical and social manifestations of gender construction in Nigeria and South Africa and weigh them against the dramatic representations of Soyinka and Mda.

The relevance of devoting a chapter to the representation of women lies in the fact that male dramatists and critics dominate African theatre¹ which, according to Gloria Chukukere, has ‘encouraged the perpetuation of an unbalanced perspective’ of women (Chukukere, 1995: 6). Arriving after the consolidation of a masculine dramatic view of Africa, the female writer is forced into the secondary position of contesting the male writer’s vision. As a consequence, ‘she has not participated in creating a tradition but is again forced to respond to specific literary traditions already established by male writers’ (Chukukere, 1995: 306). Florence Stratton goes further to contend that ‘African women writers and their works have been rendered invisible in literary criticism’ (Stratton, 1994: 1). Soyinka and Mda approach identity formations differently: Soyinka through an idealist mythic essentialism, and Mda through a materialist analysis. Since both Soyinka and Mda have been prominent in creating the literary dramatic tradition; Soyinka as Nigeria’s foremost dramatist, Mda as South Africa’s leading black dramatist of the

¹ For a perspective of this view with regard to the novel, see Femi Ojo-Ade, ‘Female Writers, Male Critics’ in E.D. Jones, ed. *African Literature Today* 13, (Oxford: Heinemann, 1983), 158-179.

literary Black Consciousness genre; they are apt choices for investigating how women identities are constructed in male writers' texts.

In examining the dramatic representation of women, I look at the types that are prevalent in African male writings and the response of women writers and critics to these representations. After that I will offer a historical perspective of women's position in society in Nigeria, bearing in mind the objective of my thesis: to see the ways in which the idea of an African identity is inescapably shaped by colonialism. I will then look at the representations of women in Soyinka's dramatic oeuvre before looking at how they function in two of his plays. I will follow a similar structure for Mda and, additionally, look at how the figure of the prostitute is informed by the social conditions he sees as a manifestation of oppression.

Fictional Representations of Women

Stereotyping of women by male writers involves two distinct types: The Mother Africa/sweet mother, and the city girl as sophisticate or prostitute. The cosmopolitan influence of Negritude popularised in poetry the trope of 'Mother Africa', which conflates with that of the 'sweet mother', 'the all-accepting creature of fecundity and self-sacrifice' (Ogundipe, 1987: 6). For the male writer, the body of the African woman is another site of contest between an imaginary pristine Africa and the racist, colonial order.² Florence Stratton comments that 'The trope is deeply entrenched in the male

² In some works, the field of female contestation involves both Africa and Europe. See for example, Tayeb Salih, *Season of Migration to the North*, (Oxford: Heinemann, 1969). Susan Andrade argues that postcolonial criticism and Western feminism subsume gender into race. This configuration privileges race. See Susan Andrade, 'Rewriting History, Motherhood, and Rebellion: Naming an African Woman's Literary Tradition,' in *Research in African Literatures* 21.1, (1990), 91-110: 93-4.

literary tradition, the sexual imperatives it encodes shaping the writing of such diverse authors as Senghor, Soyinka, and Ngugi' (Stratton, 1994: 39). The figurative appropriation of women by major African male writers constitutes reclamation from colonial stereotypical otherness. But by doing so, the essentialising counter-strategies similarly objectify female subjectivity. The male writer envisages African femininity as anything other than its colonial representation. There is a blindness to the historical construction of the female subject, of the role both colonial and anti-colonial writing and action play in its construction, and to female agency responding to the actual conditions of social and economic changes.³ The male writers' representation becomes a re-reading of colonial assumptions coupled with idealisations of an African past where tradition connotes an unproblematised patriarchy. An imagined stability of the pre-colonial past derives from this affirmation of enduring tradition, which was a colonial assumption that underwrote the imposition of indirect rule. For the writer to present the African as cultured there must be a rigid social structure against which to state claims of difference.⁴ The female becomes an item of culture to be displayed as part of the African trophy cabinet in the binary discourse of colonial opposition. Certain female attributes are reduced to archetypes to which all African women are measured against. By erasing the particularities of history and culture they become the content of myth and their identities static.

³ 'Blindness' is what I would use to describe Nana Wilson-Tagoe's thesis that African male writers present an unproblematised situation when writing about the female. See Nana Wilson-Tagoe, 'Reading Towards a Theorization of African Women's Writing: African Women's Writing within Feminist Gynocriticism' in Stephanie Newell, ed., *Writing African Women: Gender, Popular Culture and Literature in West Africa*, (London: Zed Books, 1997), 11-28.

⁴ The affirmation of a tradition, grounded in the repetition of a set of practices, are shown to be sometimes recent. They serve the purposes of the present. See Eric Hobsbawn, 'Introduction', *The Invention of Tradition*.

The city girl sophisticate/prostitute, radical opposite of Mother Africa, is the negation of pure essence and is often always the product of urban relocation. Indirect rule created the arbitrary divide between rural and urban identities. The rural is perceived as the site of pristine culture, innocent (ignorant) of an urban-located modernity. The urban site of modernity, hybridity and individualism is deemed more of a negative influence on women than on men. Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie points out that this stereotype is often used to portray the conflict between modernity and traditionalism.⁵ Where the sexuality of the Mother Africa trope is idealised as procreative and sensuous, that of the city girl is debased as degenerate, rapacious and dangerous. In a study on Yoruba popular culture, Karin Barber sees this stereotype not as part of the tradition imagined against colonial binarity but one reconstructed in light of a contemporary social, economic climate. 'It is a language created not by "culture clash" as such but by the deliberate search for the effective words for a new reality' (Barber, 1986: 20). Barber goes further to describe the modern realities that shape men's view of women. These views, conservative in outlook, are also prevalent in Yoruba popular drama.⁶

Irrespective of class, the power of representation resides with the male. In both instances, of the literary and the popular artistic, the traditional figures as the location of invented pristine values. The city is presented as a problematic site, where freedom from familial association and responsibility and the economic environment create new identities that challenge preconceived notions of womanhood. Where the woman cannot be checked through a narrowly constructed domesticity, there is an attempt to control her sexuality

⁵ See Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, 'The Female Writer and her Commitment' in *African Literature Today*: 15, Eldred Jones, Eustace Palmer and Majories Jones, eds., (U.S.A.: AWP, 1987), 5-13.

by negative representations of the single and/or childless woman. In terms of the traditional, control is through her fertility as a mother, a role lionised by many male African writers. Motherhood is viewed as the woman's primary goal. As Ogundipe-Leslie comments, 'The way African writers enthuse about motherhood, one wonders if there are no women who hate childbirth or have underdeveloped maternal instincts' (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1987: 6). In the urban location the single, childless female is represented as an aberration, as a threat to stability in the form of a home wrecker or good-time girl. Women writers find themselves contesting these stereotypes in their work, as an integral part of contemporary drama's critique of the post-independent African state.

Although Negritude's influence was felt mainly in West Africa, South African male writing used the trope of Mother Africa as a signifier of authenticity. In a study on female representation in South African English literature, Gabriella Madrassi observes that the fiction of Sol Plaatje and Thomas Mofolo used the female body as symbolic of autochthonous claims during the periods of aggressive land appropriations, backed by laws such as the Land Act of 1913.⁷ Writers such as Peter Abrahams and Alex la Guma invested black urban identities with a modern sensibility forged out of the new social patterns.⁸ Black Consciousness was later to use these same strategies of self-assertive blackness in the 1970s.

⁶ Karin Barber, 'Radical Conservatism in Yoruba Popular Plays,' in E. Bretinger and R. Sanders, eds., *Drama and Theatre in Africa*, 7, (Bayreuth: Bayreuth U, 1986), 5-32: 23.

⁷ See Gabriella Madrassi, *The Black Woman: A Woman Apart: Stereotypes and Self-Assertion in South African English Literature*, (Berne: Peter Lang, 1998).

⁸ Madrassi.

Women in Nigeria: A History

In this section I will pay particular attention to gender relations among the Yoruba, as this primarily informs Soyinka's perspective of women. This is to show how female identities are historically constructed, and to further show how the impact of colonialism is a determining factor of female identities in Soyinka's dramatic writing. As Barber has commented, male reaction to modernity created a negative impression of types of women. Traditional patriarchy and colonial phallocentrism influence this image. An examination of pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial gender relations suggest that women have played a secondary role in society, irrespective of whether they reside in the urban or rural areas. Colonial presence as a law and order regime through indirect rule, changing economic environment and Christian influence on education and domesticity contribute to reducing the presence of women in the public space and a weakening of their power in the home. These factors shape the perception of male dramatists like Soyinka in their representation of women.

The sub-groups within the Yoruba have different patterns of lineage and kinship, but they are generally patriarchal in nature.⁹ Traditional patterns of gender relations begin from the home or compound through familial relations. The patrilineal line is strongly emphasised by the fact that the wife leaves her home to become part of the husband's family. Usually the woman's rights reside with her family in her own hometown. Her authority in her husband's home is derived through her children and their inheritance

⁹ See Karin Barber, *I Could Speak Until Tomorrow: Oriki, Women and the Past in a Yoruba Town*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1991).

claims and, in a polygamous home, through her position of seniority among the other wives.

Financially women are expected to provide for their children as much as, if not more than their husbands do. Women engage mainly in trade and make up the majority of market stall holders. They may be away from the home for long periods, yet 'The ideal husband is one who lets his wife get on with her own career, with no obstacles' (Eades, 1980: 68). Polygamy allows for this flexible marriage arrangement and for women the space to become wealthy in their own right and fulfil familial responsibilities. Though their main power resides in the home they still perform important social functions and hold titles such as *Iyalode* ('mother of the town') and *Iyaloja* ('mother of the market').¹⁰ Female-only cults like the *Gelede*¹¹ are powerful in their own right and demarcate the space to which men are prohibited from entry.

The masculine approach of colonial rule weakened female presence in the political space.¹² The introduction of new forms of land tenure¹³ in Lagos and Abeokuta by the colonial administration effectively privileged the patrilineal in land and property ownership, reducing economic opportunities for women. Indeed, 'the processes that have produced the economic subordination of women and the feminization of poverty

¹⁰ William Bascom gives an account of the position of *Iyaloja* in Ife society. The *Iyaloja* assisted the leading female chief, *Yeye Ojumu*. *Iyaloja* was in charge of the market women and settled disputes between them. In Ife, the *Iyaloja* is higher in rank than the *Iyalode*. See William Bascom, *The Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria*, (U.S.A.: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, 1969), 33-4.

¹¹ See, H.J. and M.T. Drewal, *Gelede: Art and Female Power among the Yoruba*, (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1983).

¹² For a general view of the effects of colonialism on gender relations in Africa and Asia, see Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, (London: Routledge, 1998), 151-172.

¹³ The introduction of English law into land ownership was capitalised on by the educated Africans and returnees, particularly lawyers and businessmen. Individual land ownership was discriminatory not only to women but also to the

associated with the modern era began as early as the 1850s' (Mann, 1991: 705). Kristin Mann notes that the new forms of land ownership came at a time land was scarce and valuable, further pushing women to depend on men for economic subsistence. The effect of emphasising a domestic role for women led to men's attempt to control the home more tightly than the traditional system provided for. Since women could not compete fairly in the new economic spheres, their leverage in the home was reduced.

New employment possibilities of colonial rule brought about dependency. The increasing willingness of men to enter the civil service led to reliance of the wife on the husband's wage. Postings to locations far from their hometowns disconnected women from the traditional forms of enterprise and from the family network. The relative wealth of the urban man fuelled his desire to become a 'big man' in his hometown. A dependency network based on labour, client and kinship relations was created to work his land and protect his interests in his absence. In respect of the Nigerian Railway Service employees, Lisa Lindsay comments that men saw themselves as 'important providers, valuable and powerful in relations to wives and other household members' (Lindsay, 1998: 452).

The missions promoted domesticity as a modern role for women. Collaborating with male authority figures, they designed a domestic role for women. This allowed men power to shape womens' identities by positioning them as subservient in the home. Organisations like the International Committee on Christian Literacy for Africa (ICCLA) took advantage of post-war colonial policy of giving Africans a voice in the running of

peasant class. For an expansion of this view, see Oshomha Imoagene, 'Peasantization of Nigerian Farmers' in *The Nigerian Class Structure*, ed. Oshomha Imoagene, 82-86.

their affairs: But, 'Those voices were overwhelmingly male. To the extent that African men sought western training for women, it was usually with a view to having them become proficient at carrying out traditional tasks (albeit in changing contexts) rather than take on new roles' (Brouwer, 1995: 428). Margaret Wrong, a Canadian missionary who played a major role in the ICCLA's women's literacy programme made several trips to different parts of Africa on fact-finding missions for women's educational requirements. Wrong's sources were men: 'European missionaries and African men who emerged as authoritative sources by virtue of their own schooling, or their status as pastors, village leaders or local chiefs' (Brouwer, 1995: 436).

The diminishing presence of women in the political sphere did not pass unchallenged. Several uprisings instigated by women occurred during the colonial era, one of the most famous being the Aba Women's War (1929). The War was a reaction to unfair taxation. Colonial establishments were attacked and the appointed warrant chiefs were physically assaulted. In Abeokuta, the depression of the inter-war years led to men seeking greater control over their wives. But women were still active in trade, particularly in *adire* (dyed cloth). Increasing colonial control of the trade through the paramount king, the *Alake* of Egbaland, led the women to contest colonial authority. 'Dyers were implicitly critical of the unilateral power colonial rule granted local authorities. When they rejected the *Alake's* judgement, they also rejected the model of subordination' (Byfield, 1997: 97).

The market women regarded the *Alake's* handling of the matter as 'dressed up paternalism' (Byfield, 1997: 98). The *Alake* and the Resident Officer sought to portray the women as children and thus reinforce the model of paternalism. Although the women

forced a retreat by the authorities, the declining *adire* trade and new laws tightening divorce eroded social freedoms they hitherto enjoyed.

In *Ake*, Soyinka recalls another political action instigated by women. Soyinka narrates how he learned his first lessons in political activism through his participation in the Egba women's uprising of 1947-8, led by his aunt, the formidable Mrs Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti. The action of the mainly market women was again as a result of unfair taxation and the highhandedness of the colonial resident officer and the *Alake* and his chiefs. On this occasion, the incumbent *Alake* was forced into temporary exile. In Soyinka's account, the women, including Mrs Ransome-Kuti, seem to be without direction until men contribute advice to their organisation, a view at odds with other accounts.¹⁴ One is hard-pressed to accept Soyinka's account. Mrs Ransome-Kuti's reputation stretched beyond local politics. She was a nationalist who contributed immensely to the independence movement, travelling several times to London as part of pro-independence delegations.¹⁵

The reduction of female representation in the economic and political sphere was deliberate. The traditionally self-sufficient woman becomes, for the modern man, a liability and a threat, to the extent that he tries to gain control of her newly widened domestic space. Men appropriate the increased economic and political opportunities and proceed to expand them through the egocentricity of 'bigmanism', further limiting the areas through which women can articulate their concerns. As Barber has shown, this secondary position of women is dramatised in Yoruba popular theatre as an immutable

aspect of tradition. The creative space should challenge this misrepresentation. But as the next part of this chapter shows, male writers tend to reflect rather than challenge this problem.

Representation of Women in Soyinka's Plays

Wole Soyinka's plays are populated with women of unique disposition. They stand out from the ordinary, much in the same way his masculine Ogun symmetry distinguishes his male heroes. A pattern of female identities emerges through which women are characterised. Carol Boyce Davies lists the following categories as typical of Soyinka's characterisation of women: 1) the submissive and unnamed virgin and 2) the *femme fatale* or bitch goddess.¹⁶ The two types function in distinct settings, the former in the traditional/rural environment and the latter in the urban/modern location, following on from the binary scheme of Mother Africa/good time girl. A reading of female representation in Soyinka's work reveals the conservative representation of women in society as unproblematic. Like Sunma (*TSB*), the woman is the helper. Independent women fall into the stereotype of prostitute, albeit covered with a mystical aura like Segi (*Kongi's Harvest*) and Rola/Madam Tortoise (*Dance*). Where they are not prostitutes they represent pristine traditions. The earth mothers Iya Agba and Iya Mate (*Madmen*), guardians of nature's secrets, stand in opposition to Bero's rationalistic sadism. The construction of these types of identities is a marked feature of African male writing.

¹⁴ See Cheryl Johnson-Odim and Nina Mba, *For Women and the Nation: Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti of Nigeria*, (Illinois: Illinois UP, 1998). See also Cheryl Johnson-Odim and Margaret Strobel, eds. *Expanding the Boundaries of Women's History: Essays on Women in the Third World*, (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1992).

¹⁵ Odim and Strobel.

¹⁶ Carol Boyce Davies, 'Maidens, Mistresses and Matrons: Feminine Images in Selected Soyinka Works' in Carol Boyce Davies and Anne Adams Graves, eds. *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature*, (Trenton, NJ: AWP, 1986), 75-88.

Women either are pushed to the margins or are engaged not as fully realised characters in their own right as active participants of the historical and social moment. Rather they are tropes, essences, ontologies of culture.

Soyinka gives a more realistic representation of women in his satirical plays. His female characters fare better when they are set outside the mythic and function on a material level.¹⁷ They reflect Soyinka's identities constructed as manifestations of a social condition. In *Opera Wonyosi*, Madam and Polly connive as ruthlessly as their male competitors. In *The Trials of Brother Jero*, Amope the shrew responds to her environment as a petty trader trying to make a decent living. Her short temper and sharp tongue are necessary tools in the harsh economic situation, exacerbated by dishonest creditors like Jero and the lack of success of her husband, Chume. She is more the realist who works for a living rather than spending all her time in Church praying for job promotion like her husband. Amope sees through the façade of opportunists like Jero because she encounters them regularly in her line of trade. Her street toughness might irritate an audience and make them wish for Chume to beat her, a prospect Soyinka sets up skilfully, but these same traits are what help her to survive in a society besotted with wealth and status.

To see how women are represented in Soyinka's dramatic oeuvre of unique identities, I shall look at three of his female characters, Sidi, Segi, and Iyaloja and their roles in the plays. I wish to see how they relate to his androcentric ideal of an authentic African identity as potential.

The Lion and the Jewel

At the centre of *The Lion and the Jewel* (1963)¹⁸ is the contest between Baroka, the chief of Ilujinle and Lakunle the schoolteacher for the attention of Sidi, the village belle.

Within this situation the larger issue of forms and contents of tradition and modernity are contested. In order to understand Sidi's position as a woman in this text, the role of the two male characters must first be examined through the relationship between the traditional and modern identities formed in a newly independent nation.

Lakunle is the dilettante who considers all things western as the hallmark of modernity and therefore of civilisation. His dichotomy between modernity and tradition rejects Soyinka's ideas of growth and accommodation of experience for continuity. He wants to erase his own culture and adopt Western culture in its place. His affectation is a mishmash of Christian dogma, bourgeois table manners and medium rare verbosity. His dress sense reflects his incoherent thinking.¹⁹ It is incongruous with the village surroundings but typical of a man at odds with his society. His knowledge of modernity comes second-hand. Infatuated with the glamour of '...Lagos, that city where Saro women bathe/ In gold' (*Lion*, 6), Lakunle would like Sidi to be a 'modern' wife: they would be as equals, eating from fine crockery and kissing each other on the lips. But his argument is flawed. The children would eat the leftovers from dinner. His idea of gender equality is suspect. While he does not subscribe to the traditional forms of patriarchy, he

¹⁷ Davies, 85.

¹⁸ All references to the 1987 edition.

¹⁹ *Lion*, 3.

adopts Western rationalism to prove that biologically, women are inferior.²⁰ For Sidi, the issue of bride price must be settled before she considers his marriage proposal.

Lakunle's adversary, Baroka, is the lion of the play. Like Lakunle, Baroka is a caricature. He is the wily traditionalist who maintains power as a gatekeeper of development to his people, a feudal leader created by the increased powers of the traditional rulers under indirect rule.²¹ He has an insatiable appetite for the good things of life as they already present themselves, as Lakunle observes.²² He is apprehensive about having to face modernity as constituted by the nation-state rather than through native administration. Whatever cannot be directly associated to his benefit, he rejects outright. He is aided in maintaining his hegemony by the fact that he is the cultural custodian of his people. Formerly the intermediary between colonial administration and his people, he must adjust to post-independence and still maintain his status. The difference between his relationship to modernity and Lakunle's is fear. Baroka fears losing control, while Lakunle attempts to gain power under a new dispensation. Baroka worries that Lakunle is better equipped to take advantage of modernity, as he seems to understand the changing society better, and this constitutes a threat to him. Lakunle is totally consumed by modern life and wants the new to replace the old completely. Baroka, who knows less about modernity, on the other hand fears unconditional change that might erode his power: 'I do not hate progress, only its nature/Which makes all roofs and faces look the same... But the skin of progress/Masks, unknown, the spotted wolf of sameness' (*Lion*, 47-8). For Baroka, change could lead to an egalitarianism in which a greater distribution of national wealth

²⁰ *Lion*, 6.

²¹ Mamdani.

would lead to his irrelevance. In an act of self-preservation he prevents a railway line from running through Ilujinle by bribing the white surveyor to lay the tracks elsewhere.²³ Baroka is a member of Soyinka's group of royal characters; Elesin Oba, Oba Danlola; he is a great performer. Language forms part of the paraphernalia of tradition Baroka uses to strengthen his position. It is his verbal skills that he uses to successfully woo Sidi after she falls into his trap.

Sidi stands in between these two representations of tradition and modernity. She represents Soyinka's ideal of identity transformation through accommodation of new experience. She is positive about herself and her relationship to tradition and modernity. She interrogates the positions of her suitors from her position of self-worth. Our first encounter with her impresses upon us that she is a sharp, independent young woman, conscious of her beauty and her worth within the traditional setting. As a virgin, her bride price value is important to her. Against Lakunle she is the stronger character, self-assured. In contrast to Sadiku, Baroka's senior wife, Sidi is one who will not be submissive to any man, one who has determined a bright future for herself, a modern woman at home in the traditional setting. This first impression is further enhanced when her photograph and Baroka's accompany an article on Ilujinle in a city magazine. Her picture is the larger of the two. This makes her re-estimate her value in light of her newly acquired national fame: 'The school-man here has taught me many things/And my image has taught me all the rest' (*Lion*, 21). Thus she becomes the self-proclaimed jewel, prepared for national fame. Self-conscious of her beauty and conscious of Baroka's age,

²² *Lion*, 25.

²³ *Lion*, 24.

Sidi is also acutely aware of his intentions for her. When Sadiku is sent by Baroka to ask Sidi to marry him she responds: 'Ho ho! Do you think I was only born/Yesterday? The tales of Baroka's little suppers,/I know all./Tell your lord that Sidi does not sup with/Married men' (*Lion*, 23). Added to her stand on bride price, Sidi comes across as principled.

Yet Sidi falls into the Lion's den with alarming ease. Baroka successfully woos her with his eloquence, the stamp machine, and his wrestling ability. Sidi turns into a simpering mass, so unlike the self-confident woman at the beginning of the play. When she recovers her vigour, it is as Baroka's newly wedded wife, singing of his sexual prowess. Her joy is to become the mother 'of the lion stock' (*Lion*, 57). Where once she made fun of Sadiku, she now asks for the blessing of motherhood.²⁴ Her resistance broken, she falls immediately into the position of a traditional young woman: a junior wife, coveting motherhood, which defines her femininity. Her personal identity is effaced in this process of falling into a recognisable conformist position. The deviant is returned to the fold. In Soyinka's male representations, the 'deviant' is social hero, the man of action fighting against the banal repetition of tradition. Sidi's dream of national fame ends, in favour of being the wife of the local chief.

Lion is a contest of masculinities. Baroka represents the hegemonic masculinity, the dominant form acknowledged by other men and by women. Lakunle, still holding to a strand of hope that Sidi will marry him is firmly put in his place on the scale of masculinity:

SIDI: Marry who...? You thought...
 Did you really think that you and I...
 Why, did you think that after him,
 I could endure the touch of another man?
 I who have felt the strength,
 The perpetual youthful zest
 Of the panther of the trees?
 And would I choose a watered down,
 A beardless version of unripened man?
 (*Lion*, 57)

Sidi accepts Baroka's version of masculinity because Baroka's entrenched authority strengthens his hand against the upstart Lakunle. In using the two male protagonists as tropes of authenticity/inauthenticity and privileging the former, Soyinka's females end up:

as merely part of the scene of the conflict between the two men; and there is no suggestion whatsoever that the problem of cultural conflict being staged may be of interest to Sidi and Sadiku...as well, in their own right as full subjects of their social formation. (Msiska, 1998: 17)

Msiska's conclusion is formed by only the play's ending, for Sidi mediates the cultural conflict, even if she does end up marginalised. She rejects Lakunle's incoherent version of modernity. And she has known about Baroka's proclivities, which is why her

²⁴ *Lion*, 57.

capitulation is as surprising as it is stereotypical. Mediating between two dominant cultures and gaining an identity through which her demands are stated, Sidi instead falls through the crack of physical pleasure. That physical pleasure though, is a victory for Baroka. Soyinka's male heroes see sex as a deviation from their aims (Daodu). And when they capitulate, they suffer grave consequences (Elesin Oba). Yet Sidi who knows of his intentions falls for Baroka.

In effect, Sidi, who from the outset starts as self-assured, ends up as a 'classical stereotypical image of the foolish virgin' (Davies, 1986: 78). Her demands on the men are silenced at the end of the play and we see Lakunle being re-aculturated into the hegemonic masculinity. Hence Sidi's requirements serve only as a background to the contest over her by the male protagonists. Her position as a figure of two worlds, similar to that of the market women's daughters in *Death*, is never fully explored.

Kongi's Harvest

James Gibbs describes Segi as 'a woman, a femme fatale, an inspiration, an enigma' (Gibbs, 1986: 92). He also says:

Segi is in the long line of "superwomen" in Soyinka's plays which stretches back to Rola/Madam Tortoise and even to Sidi, all "right cannibals of the human species". She is not a round 'character' but she fulfils an important dramatic function: she establishes that the female principle supports the opposition to dictatorship and, on occasion, leads it. (Gibbs, 1986: 92)²⁵

²⁵ As I have shown, Sidi does not qualify as a 'superwoman' in any sense.

Gibbs' suggestion of a female principle predisposed to opposing dictatorship is problematic. What constitutes the female principle for Soyinka? In *Dance*, the mysterious Madame Tortoise preys on men and disposes of them at will. She is the catalyst for war. In *Lion*, Sidi's capitulation does not present a picture of one essentially opposed to anything. Soyinka's construction of female identity mystifies female sexuality rather than essentialises a tendency to thwart oppression. What it does is function in the duality that defines Soyinka's theory of a male-focused African identity as typified by his Ogun symmetry.

Segi's image is that of a mysterious siren, a *louche* character lurking in the shadows of power. Throughout the play she says and does little, except when begging Daodu not to respond in kind to Kongi's malevolence and at the end when she serves Kongi with her father's head on a platter. Segi's aura of mystery, her secrecy about the details of her past intimacy with Kongi and her current relationship with Daodu, is her main contribution.

Like *Lion*, *Kongi's Harvest* (first published in 1967) is a play about conflict of legitimacy for power between the factitious and the authentic. Kongi is a tyrant whose tenuous hold on authority forces on him a return to the old establishment to seek an elusive recognition. The benighted Kongi is a parvenu, blundering from one decision to another with the assistance of his advisors, the Reformed Aweri. Power-crazed, everything he initiates is to assert power, to be power itself:

SECRETARY: It is an invocation of the Spirit of Harvest to lend you strength.

KONGI: (*violently*) I *am* the Spirit of Harvest.

...

KONGI: I am the SPIRIT of Harvest.

...

KONGI: I am the Spirit of HAAR-VEST!

(KH, 91)

In trying to lay the right stress on his proclamation, Soyinka presents Kongi's uneasy disposition over his illegitimacy as ruler of Isma. This leads to the plan to have the deposed Oba Danlola present Kongi with the physical manifestation of the Spirit of Harvest, the first yam of the new season, at the State Festival. Kongi hopes that the spirit itself will pass on to him. Kongi's understanding is that total power comes from controlling the very essence of human nature. What he fails to realise is that Danlola's power stems from the material development of the people. In his blind lust to achieve this power instantly, Kongi becomes an inventor of agony, a messiah of pain and false burdens, the eyes of death itself.²⁶

Daodu, Segi's current lover, is the modernising force of tradition, a farmer whose innovative production techniques put the Government-owned farms to shame.²⁷ Daodu accepts that Danlola's era, with its pomp and pageantry, offers little resistance to Kongi's dictatorship. They must move with the times. Daodu's most potent gesture of this recognition comes when he bursts the royal drum midway through the Oba's dance, a

²⁶ KH, 99.

²⁷ KH, 79.

sacrilege even Danlola admits resignedly is necessary.²⁸ With Segi, Daodu plans to overthrow Kongi at the State Festival and rescue her incarcerated father.

Segi's mysticism is produced by her sexuality. Kongi's Secretary, on a visit to her night-club, is perturbed by her ghostly presence and her reputation, so much that he disbelieves Daodu and Segi are lovers.²⁹ Even Danlola is wary of Segi, describing her as 'a right cannibal of the female species' (*KH*, 104). The men describe Segi in mystical terms, yet she remains recognisably a city-girl type. She runs a night-club, which is a typical place such stereotyped women ply their trade. Soyinka combines this occupation with a mystique to remove her from the ordinary stereotype, which is made further possible by her relationship with powerful men.

Segi was once Kongi's lover, knowing him when he was a 'great man' (*KH*, 99). Now she is with Daodu, a powerful opposition figure, plotting Kongi's overthrow and her father's rescue. Only once she reveals her vulnerability, where she emphasises Kongi was not born a monster. This momentary lapse is brought about by Daodu's outburst, raging at Kongi's rein, and fear for her father's safety after Secretary reports that he is one of two prisoners who have escaped from custody.³⁰ She would sleep with Daodu in the middle of their plans to disrupt the festival, an offer he reluctantly postpones for an appropriate time. Segi's sexuality and Daodu's success as a farmer combine to represent fertility and regeneration in opposition to Kongi's death instinct. Since fertility is a liability to a courtesan, Soyinka tries to correct this anomaly by conflating the mother

²⁸ *KH*, 111.

²⁹ *KH*, 86.

principle with that of the city girl, which is not convincing even with the mystical sheen he coats Segi with. This same sheen hides omissions such as the class status between Segi and Daodu. Would a person of Daodu's royal status really have a serious, open relationship with Segi in full view of Oba Danlola and his father, Sarumi? Here Soyinka is suggesting new social formations with personal relationships. But he does not problematise this relationship, considering the notable presence of Daodu's father and uncle. They would certainly oppose this relationship. A conflation of two stereotypes, Segi is never rendered as human except when she wants to bed Daodu. Rather she lurches between the two types. As a symbol of anti-oppression, her mystique is not imbued with power of resistance but of sexuality. Her identity is one of the unattainable courtesan whose power and mystique derive from her association with powerful men.

Sylvia Bryan supports Soyinka's representation of women through Segi. 'With overtones of the Fall in which woman was instrumental, Soyinka is implying that duality is an inescapable part of the human experience of which the male-female relationship is an aspect', stressing that this relationship is 'vital to man's maturity, self-knowledge and psychic awareness' (Bryan, 1987: 124). In Bryan's own defence of Soyinka she postulates a position for women that remains determined by men. Are we to assume that for Soyinka, women are present only to aid man's 'maturity, self-knowledge and psychic awareness'? We cannot assume Soyinka's female characters already possess these attributes and therefore must help man, the late developer to acquire them. None of Soyinka's female characters support this thesis. Apart from his satires, in nearly all the relationships, men take charge. In the satires, where Soyinka's characters are formed by

³⁰ KH, 97.

the mood of the nation, the women compete with the men in the material and social environment. Though Segi makes the last statement of the play by presenting to Kongi her father's head on a platter, she lacks determinative power. We are still in the period of Soyinka's view of the singular hero of special qualities as a facilitator for social change. This view becomes explicit when we see how, in a different time of his career, Iyaloja, a character of status, operates within the sphere of authority in a male-dominant society.

Death and the King's Horseman

In general, women hardly play any leadership role in Soyinka's works, in *Death and the King's Horseman* however, the converse is the case, for not only is Iyaloja given a prominent role: she is indeed the conscience of the community, she is an outspoken woman leader and she berates Elesin Oba for failing his generation. (Ogunba, 1994: 15-16)

In *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975)³¹ Iyaloja is central to understanding the consequences of Elesin Oba's failed ritual suicide for the people of Oyo. Her position as mother of the market makes her the head of an important financial and social institution in Yorubaland. The market is the lifeblood of the community. Smaller Obas are referred to as 'Oloja' – the owner of the market – and the palace is usually situated in front of the main marketplace.³²

In the pivotal role as communal conscience, Iyaloja prods Elesin Oba to fulfil his obligation to society. In order to facilitate the preparations for a smooth transition to the

³¹ All references to the 1998 edition.

³² 'The Oba was the overseer of the market – a fact which makes his residence overlook the main market-place', G.J.A. Ojo, *Yoruba Palaces*, (London: U of London P, 1966), 29-34: 32.

spiritual realm, Iyaloja grants Elesin's every indulgence, just as in times past. Iyaloja even sacrifices her son's virgin bride-to-be to Elesin's lust. Overruling the market women's objections, Iyaloja glosses over Elesin's sacrilege to make ceremony of what is little more than legalised rape. This particular act highlights Iyaloja's character as conservative and incapable of contesting traditions outside the field of her social position. Her 'communal conscience' is not representative of all the people, only of the traditional establishment. She sacrifices the life of a young girl to the avarice of a man who is soon going to die. B.M. Ibitokun, in analysing this situation comments:

When sacrifices or rites of such magnitude are to be undertaken, it is a taboo in Yoruba ethics for the celebrants to go close to the second sex. Iyaloja and Elesin Oba as well as the other women are acting or reasoning in bad faith, in contradistinction to Yoruba communal ethics. (Ibitokun, 1995: 45)

The market women do harbour reservations but Iyaloja grants Elesin's request over and above their disapproval. Elesin commits a wilful transgression, masking the outrageous request behind his eloquence. He first sets up the women by requesting for a change of clothes,³³ then uses the same strategy to later request for the virgin bride that Soyinka describes as a 'distraction'. While the market women become restive, Iyaloja closes ranks with Elesin to grant his request: 'The voice I hear is already touched/by the waiting fingers of our departed. I dare not refuse' (*Death*, 160). It is only after Elesin's detainment by Pilkings that his actions register fully as an abomination to her. 'I warned you, if you must leave a seed behind, be sure it is not tainted with the curses of the world... Who are you to bring this abomination on us!' (*Death*, 210) This is a *volte-face* from her previous privileging of the spirit world. 'Only the curses of the departed are to

be feared' (*Death*, 161) is her response to the market women's indignation, which shows that, though she is their head, their interests are not the same.

In respect to her position in society and the role that she plays in the failed ritual suicide, Iyaloja resembles Oroge and Jaguna in *TSB*. Like her male counterparts, Iyaloja is the unyielding force of conservatism, not for turning in the widening gyre of change. Her pragmatism woefully covers the tears in the fabric of a society lingering about the fringes of a bygone era. Where the patriarchs of *TSB* use masculine belligerence to enforce tradition, Iyaloja uses motherly coaxing. Unlike the Earth Mothers of *Madmen*, Iyaloja fails to acknowledge the amoral and temporal nature of culture, casting her lots in favour of the tradition that sustains her authority. Iya Agba and Iya Mate understand the nature of the earth through their knowledge of its ontology within their cultural scheme. This knowledge leads them to destroy their life work rather than allow Bero to misappropriate it. Their action is in keeping with Soyinka's trope of Ogunian duality of creativity and destruction, and more importantly, of moral resoluteness. Iyaloja, however, does not respond so instinctively to Elesin's transgression. She can only warn him of the repercussions of failure because she does not possess the insight of the earth mothers.

Another male writer handles the role of a powerful woman in a traditional society differently. In Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*, Bint Majzoub is an outspoken, manly woman, whose power to speak on an equal footing with her male contemporaries stems from the fact that she has outlived many husbands. She has inherited their wealth. Bint Majzoub however accepts the subservient role of women. Her

³³ *Death*, 155.

outspokenness supports the objectification of women.³⁴ Communal crisis is caused by another woman refusing to accept her status. Hosna Bint Mahmoud, Mustafa Sa'eed's widow refuses to play the role of Soyinka's virgin bride. She turns against the patriarchy that forces her to marry the misogynist Wad Rayyes. Coerced into silence by the community, she kills him and commits suicide on their marital bed when Rayyes rapes her. Her last act forces upon society the identity of women and their determination to assert themselves outside a narrow patriarchy.

Iyaloja's sacrifice of the virgin bride situates her more firmly as part of an ageing infrastructure that objectifies women. She speaks on behalf of the virgin, who is silent throughout, only to sacrifice her future. In the home in traditional society, the mother or mother-in-law exerts great influence. As a publicly influential figure, Iyaloja wields even greater authority over the virgin bride.³⁵ The mimicking of British mannerisms by the market women's daughters suggests that, through colonial education and nation-building, Iyaloja will no longer exert such control without resistance, as the institution which underpins her power continues to weaken.

Iyaloja's social position allows her to smother all the counter-arguments given by the market women. As their leader she colludes with Elesin Oba to commit an abomination. It is through her position that she is able to carry out this act without fear of retribution. As a custodian she betrays the very traditions that hold society together. Her attempts to inject humanity into the sacrifice give Elesin an opportunity to indulge himself as he has

³⁴ See John E. Davidson, 'In Search of a Middle Point: The Origins of Oppression in Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*,' in *Research in African Literatures*, 20, (1989), 385-400: 387.

always done. Thus she is implicated in Elesin's failure. As a matriarch she partakes fully in the relegation of women in the social sphere. Her admonitions of the arrogant Pilkings consolidates her position of a Negritudinal objectifier of tradition, but it is her complicity in the thwarting of its edicts that leads to the tragedy in Oyo.

In the next part of this chapter I will examine Mda's representation of women with the same structures used for Soyinka. Also I will look at how Mda's representation of the prostitute is shaped by the social economic factors that cause the rural-urban dichotomy.

Women in South Africa: A History

The nature of the colonial enterprise and the regional economic and social dominance of South Africa altered considerably the position of black women in society. The white settler population factored race into the social and economic make-up in ways more pernicious than in areas where a settler presence was absent. The family as the focal point of community bore the deleterious effects of apartheid and capitalism. Control of the movements of the indigenous population by the white minority to satisfy their competing demands for land and cheap labour in agriculture, industry and mining shifted great burdens on black women in the rural areas. A desire for social segregation led to a plethora of laws preventing general use of public facilities, banning of multi-racial association and the constitution of Bantustans. Male-only hostels and short-term work contracts ensured the migration of blacks to the urban white areas would be transitory. The major interests of the men would remain in their rural homes to which they would

³⁵ Within the family, junior women have little rights with their in-laws. See Barber, 108-9. A modern representation of this relationship is given by Buchi Emecheta in *Kehinde*, (Oxford: Heinemann, 1994).

have to return regularly. Women were to stay in the rural areas to cater for the children and the aged and work the farms. Work formerly done by men was now added to women's duties, making avenues for earning extra income severely curtailed. It also meant there was less manpower to develop the rural areas. The poor financial situation was further exacerbated by women's reliance on their husband's remittances. Where the remittances were irregular, women became vulnerable to chiefs who had custodial authority over them, and to their in-laws. A consequence of this was the increasing power of men over women.

Women had to devise new means of dealing with these social complications which favoured men, as the spaces they controlled came under pressure. The masculine nature of colonialism³⁶ weakened female positions in power in the public sphere.³⁷ Although the colonial administration worked within the traditional system, women were still subject to discriminatory laws. Acts such as the Basuto Native Women's Restriction Proclamation (1915) and the Urban Areas Act (1930 Amendment) in South Africa put women under the custodial authority of men, restricted their movements in the city and carried jail terms for their violation.

Traditional society provided greater flexibility in gender relations. The traditional Basotho practice of concubinage, *bonyatsi*, allowing for extra-marital relations predated the growth of the labour migrancy system. But the changing social patterns in the urban

³⁶ See the essays in Nancy Hunt, Tessie Liu and Jean Quataert, eds. *Gendered Colonialisms in African Histories*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

³⁷ 'The appointment of female regents (or 'caretakers') was a practice which long pre-dated even the formation of the Basotho state... In 1941, 'Mantsebo Seeiso was elected "Paramount Chieftaness", and by 1955 four of 22 most senior

areas soon affected traditional ways of life. There was a decline in polygamous houses.

Women lost status with their in-laws if their husbands were not remitting their allowances. To earn money women turned to beer brewing and prostitution.³⁸

Women also turned to religion. In the Roman Catholic Mission in colonial Lesotho, Basotho nuns had a great deal of autonomy. Although a conservative institution the Church was seen as a place to escape from traditional male patriarchy. 'By 1939, (long before Basotho men attained positions of authority in the Church) the nuns were in effect running the day-to-day operations of schools, clinics, gardens etc' (Epprecht, 1995: 33).

The Church played a major role in domesticating women. Due to pass laws preventing women from working in urban areas, African men took employment as domestics. Both African women and men protested against this situation. Men considered the work emasculating, preferring to work in the mines. Women saw domestic service as apposite to fulfilling their work needs. At the same time the missionaries were espousing domesticity as an ideal for women. Gender bias in the missionary practice appealed to African women for other reasons:

Because this domestic ideology was so enmeshed with women's spiritual role, domesticity was much more part of the missionary instruction of African women converts than any corresponding stress on fatherhood and home responsibilities in priestly training of Christian males. For urban black females in early industrial South Africa, Christianity was as much about a specific family form, of which they were the linchpin, as about a new faith in Christ. There was a domestic basis to the entire range of activities in which female missionaries were involved. Their

chiefs, the "Sons of Moshesh" were women.' Marc Epprecht, 'Women's "Conservatism" and the Politics of Gender in Late Colonial Lesotho' in *Journal of African History* 36 (1995), 29-56: 34.

³⁸ For a study on these and other effects, see Tshidiso Maloka, 'Khomolua Oela: Canteens, Brothels and Labour Migrancy in Colonial Lesotho, 1900-40', *Journal of African History* 38 (1997), 101-122.

instruction of African girls, their religious cooperation with adult women, the social welfare projects they initiated, were all imbued with this particular view of the family, while the word 'home' itself took on a powerful appeal in missionary vocabulary. (Gaitskell, 1983: 242)

These missionary-trained women provided domestics for white households and dutiful housewives - a new phenomenon in indigenous cultures - for African Christian homes. From the beginning of the 20th century, schools were set up with female-only hostels to train black women. African Christians desired these schools/hostels, seeing them as beneficial to the development of girls and young women. Young students saw this education as an avenue to greater things and were not happy being taught only home economics. They viewed the schools as a route to teacher training, where they could become qualified teachers, a profession that would increase their value as prospective wives.³⁹ Control of women was uppermost in the thinking of the missionaries, male traditionalists and African Christians. They agreed that a girl became a woman not through childbirth but through marriage.⁴⁰

These pressures portray women as powerless, trapped between traditional patriarchy and a phallocentric modernity. The consignment of women to the rural areas, the battery of housing and pass laws tying them to male authority, the imposition of domesticity at home and as a form of employment, push them out of the political sphere. But this is not the case. As noted above, women saw domestic work as a way out of the rural areas and as a way of advancement. The private domain of the home was perceived as their place of

³⁹ See Deborah Gaitskell, 'Christian Compounds for Girls: Church Hostels for African Women in Johannesburg, 1907-1970' in *Journal of Southern African Studies* 6.1 (1979), 44-69.

⁴⁰ See Deborah Gaitskell, 'Housewives, Maids or Mothers: Some Contradictions of Domesticity for Christian Women in Johannesburg, 1903-1939' in *Journal of African History* 24. 2 (1983), 248.

authority. Marc Epprecht comments on the attitudes of Lesotho women to the public space of politics:

Politics, narrowly conceived as the exercise or pursuit of power in the so-called public sphere, have also tended to render the day to day activities and perceptions of poor women inconsequential compared to the concerns or obsessions of elite males. Basotho women themselves commonly adhere to the view that their activities are outside “politics”, a disreputable, masculine pursuit by definition. (Epprecht, 1995: 31)

Greater independence, a consequence of the ruptures caused by labour migrancy, led to women-run homes in the rural areas. Traditional practices such as men marrying their brother's widows (Sesotho – *ho kenala*) declined in light of the poor economic situation. The tendency of Basotho women to prefer conservative institutions like the Roman Catholic Mission and, after independence (1966), the Basotho National Party was due to the fact that they held positions as nuns and as active members of government-organised Village Development Committees.⁴¹

The implications of indirect rule in identity formations for women are seen through the urban-rural relations. New social structures in the urban areas, formed by work associations and homeboy networks helped along with the missionary influence to create an appeal to ethnic identities, especially for men.⁴² One of the features of ethnic ideology was the control of women. The chiefs of indirect rule gained legitimacy by assisting men in overlooking migrant interests in the homelands. The family came under the authority of the chief where previously it had been part of the wider family network. And so ‘an

⁴¹ See Martha Mueller, ‘Migrants and Women who Wait: Women and Men, Power and Powerlessness in Lesotho’ in *Signs* 3.1 (1977), 154-166: 159.

emphasis on the need to control women and a stress on the protection of the integrity of the family came to be intrinsic to both ethnic ideologies and the actual institutional practices of indirect rule' (Vail, 1999: 65). Male perception of women, though, continued to be formed by the urban experience.⁴³

The perception of the home as the place of women continued as part of the masculine inflected nationalist rhetoric. In 1950s Zimbabwe, legislation prohibited single women from access to housing. Women aligned with male-led unions and political movements to mount a challenge that eventually failed, 'and when nationalists later began to challenge the colonial state in other ways, their request to balance respectability against the movement's needs to recruit migrant male labourers meant that they, too, treated such women as dangerous and disruptive' (Cooper, 1994: 1523).

The rhetoric of the Black Consciousness Movement was masculine in tone, placing women in the roles of mothers and helpers.⁴⁴ There was an oversight of the active role women played in resistance to hegemonic practices.⁴⁵ The domestic space and the work of women as shebeen owners and prostitutes, popular figures of township musicals were not considered as spectacularly heroic as the urban movements of the mineworkers and

⁴² Vail, 62.

⁴³ For how the urban migrant experience shaped thinking about women, see Leslie Banks, 'Men with Cookers: Transformations in Migrant Cultures, Domesticity and Identity in Duncan Village, East London', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 25.3 (1999), 393-416.

⁴⁴ Another view of this situation is that family disruption caused by apartheid prevented the home from being the site of anti-apartheid struggle. Also, during and after 1976, young people came to the fore of the struggle, and it is their image of mothers that dominates Black Consciousness. See Deborah Gaitskell and Elaine Unterhalter, 'Mothers of the Nation: A Comparative Analysis of Nation, Race and Motherhood in Afrikaner Nationalism and the African National Congress', in Nira Yurval-Davis and Floyd Anthias, eds. *Women-Nation-State* (U.K.: Macmillan, 1989), 58-78.

⁴⁵ See Colin Bundy, 'Amafelandawonye (the Die-Hards): Popular Protests in Women's Movements in Herschel District in the 1920s' in William Beinart and Colin Bundy, *Hidden Struggles in Rural South Africa*, (London: James Currey, 1987), 222-269.

rebellious students, which was the main focus of township theatre.⁴⁶ Margaret Lenta comments on the masculine nature of Black Consciousness:

Yet although the Black Consciousness Movement insisted that blacks must speak for themselves, it also advocated a kind of unity – a unanimity which assumed that the black man, always referred to as such, and represented by masculine pronouns, could speak for all the people, who were equally, if not identically oppressed. It cannot therefore be claimed that Black Consciousness deliberately provided a sympathetic climate for black women who wish to “speak for” themselves. Black “tradition,” although usually, in the context of urban life in the 1970s and 1980s, a reconstruction rather than a continually observed set of precedents, has been invoked to insist that women ought to be silent and ancillary to men. (Lenta, 1998: 110)

Lenta's comments show this perception of women as men's helpers in the liberation struggle is ahistorical. It also delegitimises women's issues as non-consequential to the liberation effort. Women's resistance was not only at the national level against apartheid but also in the home. They fought for their interests against the political and economic hegemony and against patriarchy. For example, the Women's Auxiliary helped extend the Beer Hall boycott of 1929 to the rural areas of Natal. Apart from the fact government competition was ruining their shebeen business, ‘Men squandering wages on municipal beer became a symbolic and economic attack on the brittle integrity of the household in which women occupied a pivotal role’ (la Hausse, 1988: 115). In a study on women and National Liberation, Tessa Marcus identifies the difficulty in using the term feminism to describe these acts of resistance by South African women who are neither white nor

⁴⁶ Women are practically absent in the major plays of the 1970s and 1980s. Apart from the works of Matsemela Manaka and Gibson Kente, most dramatists follow the conventional forms of resistance theatre by focusing on male agency. See Kathy A. Perkins, ‘Introduction’ in *Black South African Women: An Anthology of Plays* (London: Routledge, 1998), 2.

middle class. She shows how tending to the issues germane to South African women can invigorate the term.⁴⁷

The home is pivotal to understanding women's importance⁴⁸ in the Southern African political economy and resistance to oppression. Women testify to wider concerns about themselves and oppression, whether by apartheid or by men.⁴⁹ Southern African women also have found a voice through writing and storytelling.⁵⁰ The destabilisation of the home led to the reconfigurations of identities imagined and/or necessitated by outside factors. Women, similar to the workers' situation, are relevant only within their political identities. Cheryl Walker comments that outside political discourses, little attention is paid to the representation of women in other aspects of their lives. 'The context in which motherhood has most often been discussed, the aspect which continues to hold the most interest for researchers, has been the expression in political organisations and campaigns, rather than the day-to-day experiences of mothers' (Walker, 1995: 420).

During the violent uprisings of the 1980s, black South African women responded through writing, as there was an increase in short stories about racial oppression. Apart from the concerns about state oppression their writing tended to 'keep to the quieter sphere of ordinary, domestic life' (Daymond, 1996: 192). Women dramatists also represented other

⁴⁷ Tessa Marcus, 'The Women's Question and National Liberation in South Africa' in Maria van Diepen, ed., *The National Question in South Africa*, (London: Zed Books, 1988), 96-109.

⁴⁸ Though the home is a place of importance, the city was also a place of escape from patriarchal authority and women did move to the townships under threat of legal sanctions. See Philip Mayer and Iona Mayer, *Townsmen or Tribesmen*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1979), 233-269.

⁴⁹ See Ellen Kuzwayo, *Call Me Woman*, (London: Women's Press, 1985).

⁵⁰ See K. Limakatso Kendall, *Basali! Stories by and about Women in Lesotho*, (South Africa: U of Natal P).

identities within traditional patriarchy, within the apartheid state⁵¹ and history.⁵² Works such as Gcina Mhlophe's *Have You Seen Zandile?* incorporated traditional story-telling. Her story-telling group, *Zanendaba* ('Tell me a story') has helped create a wider audience for representation of women's issues.⁵³

Representation of Women in Mda's Plays

Mda's representation of women is unique in Black Consciousness theatre. He moulds women's issues into the political space of anti-apartheid action. Mda's bringing of the personal and the political informs the didactic element of his work. In *DVR* and in *Girls*, the politically informed character conscientises his or her opposite. This strategy explains the underlying factors of oppression that act as false consciousness on the subject. The world, in the context of the woman as mother or prostitute takes on a new meaning, as the realisation of these positions as ideological blindfolds leads to the possibility of change.

Dark Voices Ring

First performed in 1979, *Dark Voices Ring*⁵⁴ deals with the psychological malady of an old woman who, with her husband, benefited from the social disequilibrium of apartheid. The desire for self-esteem blinds her to the reality of holding a privileged position in apartheid South Africa without considering the politics of race. Her husband, Old Man who is now in a catatonic state, 'was a *baas*-boy on Jan van Wyk's farm' (*DVR*, 55). Old Man, a zealous overseer, wielded his authority brutally over the black farm labourers.

⁵¹ Gcina Mhlophe, *Have you Seen Zandile?* (London: Methuen, 1988). Fatima Dike, 'So What's New?,' in Zakes Mda ed., *Four Plays* (South Africa: Vivla, 1996).

⁵² Fatima Dike, 'The Sacrifice of Kreli,' in Stephen Gray ed., *Theatre One* (Johannesburg: Ad Donker, 1978).

⁵³ See Marcia Blumberg, 'Revaluing Women's Storytelling in South Africa' in Marcia Blumberg and Dennis Walder, eds., *Cross Cultures 38: South African Theatre as/and Intervention*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), 137-146.

Known to his boss as ‘my faithful *induna*’ and by the labourers as ‘*Kaptein*’ and ‘*morena*’ (*DVR*, 55) Old Man was an uncompromising taskmaster, administering corporal punishment to the workers, to the glee of the white supervisors. Paulo Freire comments on the psychology of the oppressed in this situation:

It is a rare peasant who, once “promoted” to overseer, does not become more of a tyrant towards his former comrades than the owner himself. This is because the context of the peasant’s situation, that is, oppression, remains unchanged. In this example, the overseer, in order to make sure of his job, must be as tough as the owner – and more so. (Freire, 1993: 28)

Through Freire’s definition, Old Man’s brutality is attributable to the nature of the oppressive state. Like his wife, he seeks self-actualisation within the oppressor culture rather than within his community, making him a collaborator. She voices their experience and their desires, which cut them off from her fellow Africans. She narrates to Man how Old Man, at the instigation of his overseers oppresses the farm labourers, justifying his actions.⁵⁴ The labourers avenge their harsh treatment by beating Old Man and burning down his hut with his baby daughter, Nontobeko, inside. The ensuing trauma renders him speechless and Woman in a state of denial.

Woman tied her interests to Old Man’s work on the farm, unable to recognise that the farm’s success is at the cost of her oppression. Her personal gain of hand-me-downs, her pride in her husband’s ability to make the prison-labourers work, something even the white overseers could not achieve, create this illusion of success. Another source of

⁵⁴ All references to the 1990 edition.

⁵⁵ *DVR*, 62.

misplaced pride is the fact 'Nontobeko was born in no simple mud hut. She was born in the *huis* of the master of the farm' with van Wyk's wife as the midwife (*DVR*, 56).

Woman cannot view her situation except as Old Man's wife and Nontobeko's mother. Her privileges obviate her understanding of the implications of race in the reality of her position. Her only concern is to provide for her family. Under reduced circumstances, when her husband is unable to work, Woman is unable to function among her own people and withdraws from society. She believes her husband's state is caused by supernatural means employed by her perceived enemies. Haunted by the past, she thinks her neighbours are jealous of her and that the men will sexually abuse her. Her paranoia extends to her assumptions of Man's dream. She turns his dream of freedom into a prurient peepshow, with her neighbours in attendance.⁵⁶ She cuts off the very people who can aid her recuperation. In her constructed present, based on this past, she still believes that Nontobeko is alive, grown up and married to Man.

Through the home, Mda shows how people work towards their own oppression. Woman's motherly instincts towards her family close off wider associations of politics. Her morality is formed by hegemonic ideology, leaving her unable to think outside the boundaries of her set position. Within the minimal frame of her desires there is left only a space for spurious moral justification of Old Man and her actions. Those who hate her are envious of her. Her husband is a hardworking man deserving of his privileges. The prison labourers are 'cruel beasts,' irrespective that Old Man is bestial towards them. 'It's their attitude towards the old man that was wrong' (*DVR*, 61), she claims. When Man queries

her as to whether she realises that Old Man was colluding with the oppressors she replies, 'He was only doing his work, my child' (*DVR*, 63).

Man is the counter narrator to Woman's text. He is a psychoanalyst to Woman's analysand, helping her to reach catharsis. This catharsis is to purge her unfounded fears and, in the process, to conscientize her, to make her understand the falseness of her past so that she can engage the present in community with the oppressed masses. From the start Man's position is made clear. He is a revolutionary figure who is 'leaving the village for the north, to join those men who are dying in order to save us' (*DVR*, 60). His credentials established, he goes about dismantling Woman's narrative of events. He implicates her and Nontobeko in the personal and public tragedy. Woman is the one who played the dutiful wife, 'To give more strength to the hand that was wielding the whip' (*DVR*, 55). Since his marriage to Nontobeko was arranged, Man had no say in the matter. He regards the prisoners who killed Nontobeko as his personal liberators.⁵⁷ Here we see how tradition can act as a form of oppression. Man's realisation of this fact places him in a position where he can clearly articulate to Woman a way out of her condition by relating to people of similar circumstances. He does this by first destroying her illusion of superiority.

Man's unsympathetic treatment of Woman finally brings her and Old Man to face the past. Man's frankness is brutal. He does not mythicise or chant slogans to ease Woman's conscientisation. He does not paint a picture of racial pride to convince her to return to

⁵⁶ *DVR*, 57-8.

⁵⁷ *DVR*, 59.

her community. Woman and Old Man finally give Man their blessings to join the guerrilla army fighting the war of freedom. Woman's blessing marks the beginning of her entry into society as she finally accepts that she must integrate into the anti-hegemonic culture before the war of liberation is over.

Old Man's voiceless state allows Woman to state both of their cases for collaborating with apartheid from within the family space. Her family concerns, apolitical for her, are deconstructed by Man to emphasise the fact that the personal and the political are intertwined. The resistance of the prison labourers contests Woman's belief in the system that rewards her husband, which she internalises as nakedness in her dreams. Everything significant of 'home' is lost to the political arena of which she has no claim. Man shows Woman that her past self-worth is misplaced but can be regained among her own people in a non-oppressive atmosphere. It is only at the end that Mda bridges the gap between the political and the personal to ease the bleakness of the play. By sublimating the personal family tragedy within the wider issue of apartheid society, Mda shows how women are not and cannot be bystanders against oppression.

Joys of War

Joys of War (first performed in 1989) explores the personal issues surrounding those actively involved in the liberation struggle. Apart from examining the effects of these issues on the soldiers on the frontlines, Mda also looks at the people left behind, who suffer separation and social dislocation. Mda implies that though they are indirectly involved in the armed resistance to oppression, they equally have their own valuable

contributions to offer, and thus their own story should not be discounted in the liberation narrative. The ones left behind are, inevitably, women, children and the aged. Mda shows that, at any time, they too can join the armed resistance and that the frontline is wherever oppression exists.

Mda also looks at how important community is among a people in a state of continuous displacement. Bhekikizwe Peterson notes this situation as a common feature of Mda's plays, as a personal commentary on the playwright's own migratory experience:

Mda's characters enter the barren Southern African landscape with little except their own dignity and survival. We rarely meet them in their homes, instead we constantly find them adrift on personal or historical journeys... They are either on the road or waiting at some impersonal social or governmental space. The thread of being caught between two worlds – oppression and liberation, the roads leading away from home towards the capital and its spaces of petty officialdom – obviously parallels the distances covered by the Mda family and their own sense of marking time. (Peterson, 1993: x)

Forced removals and relocations were a major experience of the urban blacks.⁵⁸

Sophiatown in the 1950s was the last place blacks could own property in Johannesburg.⁵⁹

In such parlous conditions, a sense of community had to be built to gain a sense of normality. It is the sense of communal disappointment that leads Mama and Nana to search for their son and father, Soldier One.

Mama and Nana are on a quest to regain their dignity and so be able to face their community after the strange disappearance of Soldier One. Unlike Woman in *DVR*, they

⁵⁸ See Elaine Unterhalter, *Forced Removal: The Division, Segregation and Control of the People of South Africa*, (London: IDAF, 1987).

are victims of a real whispering campaign. Soldier One has seemingly absconded from leading the battle against government eviction from their squatter camp home. Rumours abound that he has deserted his people. Mama and Nana are left to deal with the people's anger and distrust.⁶⁰ Bolstered by her son's involvement in past struggles, Mama sets out to find him and redeem his reputation. She believes he has been incarcerated again by the authorities, for it is part of the black experience to be arrested, interrogated and tortured in their bid to assert their basic human rights.⁶¹ Nana is afraid of incarceration, but Mama tells her: 'You'll learn to cope. Women bring up their children in prison every day' (*Joys*, 102). Mama seeks to make young Nana understand the true condition of their lives. To the oppressive forces, racism makes no distinction of sex or age.

Nana's doll is her only semblance of normal childhood. This is her crutch, her fantasy around which she constructs her own world. But reality constantly intrudes upon her make-believe world, for the doll continually 'dies'. Nana's doll, like an *abiku*, dies to live again in a vicious cycle that parallels the upheaval of the squatter camps. It is a phoenix, representing the rise of a new community from the embers, of the spirit that refuses to be crushed by the bulldozers. Nana's incorporation of death into her make-believe world is based also on the experience of her mother's death during her birth. Nana plays the mother she never had in a grasp at lost childhood in a world of death and violence. In this, she resembles Woman in *DVR*, and Sergeant in *WSF*, except that she is a child yet to reach the cognitive level of the adult characters who in the face of reality choose self-deception.

⁵⁹ For a sociological study on the effects of the land question, see essays in Richard Levin and Daniel Weiner, eds., *No More Tears: Struggle for Land in Mpumalanga, South Africa*, (U.S.A./Eritrea: AWP, 1997).

Nevertheless, Nana pines for her lost childhood. Mama directs her gaze forward, to an uncertain future. Mama realises Nana cannot afford to be a child in the oppressive environment: ‘You cannot be a child. Not until we reach our destination. You were born a young woman, and you are going to remain a young woman...’ (*Joys*, 87). She wants to be like the other children around her and be part of a proper family. But her father has gone off to fight for her future by trying to put an end to the cycle of destruction and rebuilding. To create a normal life for his daughter Soldier One must abandon her, with the possibility of leaving her an orphan.

The pain of watching her son experience detention and torture burdens Mama. She and Nana endure the accusations of desertion against Soldier One. She it is who brings up her granddaughter under violent conditions through strategies of survival. She humours Nana’s fixation with her doll. Mama assists in mending the doll whenever it ‘dies’ as a way of helping Nana cope with real loss.

Soldier Two’s involvement in the guerrilla movement is to ‘atone’ for a crime of passion. He falsely reports the rich Man his lover has left him for to the authorities as a collaborator with the guerrillas. Man dies under interrogation, leaving Woman, his lover, widowed. Woman wanted more from life than what the constrictions in society could allow a person of modest means to provide. Like Woman in *DVR*, she is prepared to shut herself off from the rest of society to achieve her aim:

⁶⁰ *Joys*, 90.

⁶¹ *Joys*, 102.

SOLDIER TWO: Somehow we shall survive. Like all our people, we have always survived.

WOMAN: I have survived long enough. Now I want to live. Live, in the day and in the night.

SOLDIER TWO: We have each other.

WOMAN: And in the evenings, when others go out to dinners, and to theatres, and to concerts, we shall sit in our shelter and listen to obituaries on the radio.

SOLDIER TWO: Isn't that what families do? Obituaries are one of the most popular prime time radio programmes. Families sit around the portable and listen to them every week. I cannot change a tradition.

WOMAN: I have tasted better ways of spending my time.

(*Joys*, 129)

Nana and Woman both seek something that under non-oppressive regimes would be considered normal. But the political conditions impinge on their personal desires.

Njabulo Ndebele states that even under harsh conditions, people struggle for a semblance of order:

They will attempt to apply tradition and custom to manage their day to day family problems: they will resort to socially acquired behaviour patterns to eke out a means of subsistence. They apply systems of value that they know. Often these values will undergo changes under certain pressing conditions. The transformation of those values constitute the essential drama in the lives of ordinary people. (Ndebele, 1986: 154)

Mda highlights these transformations of values as they come under stress by the larger conflict. Soldier Two's confession leaves him with a clear mind to commit the final restitutive act of suicide now that he has seen the future success of the struggle in Nana. Nana assumes womanhood by uniting with her father as a daughter and as a comrade in arms by an act of consciousness. She makes the transition from her fear of going to prison to her determination to join the resistance, as her dreams of childhood are cast aside. But she leaves the door open that she may come to know what childhood can be like by handing her doll to Mama not to destroy but to keep until her return.

The Figure of the Prostitute in *The Hill*

I return to *The Hill* to focus attention on the way that Mda portrays the prostitute. The prostitutes fit the criteria of the girls who leave the rural areas for the city and are corrupted by its influences.⁶² Veteran's blaming them for his misfortune is typical of some migrant's attitude towards women in general. In a study on migrant cultures and identity, Leslie Banks notes that the migrants formed new social relations to accommodate their new surroundings, which led to a decline in their rural cultures. In turn, the migrants became less committed to their rural homes. The city and the workplace informed their ideas of masculinity and of women. Women were thought of as immoral bloodsuckers and prostitutes and were blamed for all the ills that befell them.⁶³ Mda portrays them as rapacious, stripping Veteran of his possessions and leaving him trouser-less. But they are no different than the men in respect to the treachery and inhumanity displayed in the play. Factors beyond their individual control breed the

⁶² Another perspective on the contribution of prostitutes during the liberation struggle in Zimbabwe is offered by Virginia Phiri, *Desperate*, (Zimbabwe: Self-Published).

culture of survival in which even a relative can be a client for a prostitute.⁶⁴ This breakdown of values is no different from the sodomy that reportedly goes on in the mines and of which Young Man fantasises as an avenue for acquiring wealth.

The hill is also a refuge for the prostitutes to escape repatriation back to the rural areas. 'There is a big campaign going on. "Keep Maseru clean" it is called. They rout out all the people who cannot prove they have regular jobs. They say they are going to send them back to the villages. It is their way of fighting crime' (*TH*, 103). Independence has been gained but the reconstruction of society is yet to begin. The dichotomy between the rural and the urban continues to exist, further enhancing the stereotyped identities of single women as loose through punitive, repatriation laws.

The prostitutes remain within their historical and social condition as representative of the gender inequalities that force them to operate on the margins. Mda sees them not as simply allegories of a rural/urban division or as symbols in protest against colonialism, neo-colonialism and capitalism.⁶⁵ The women, like the men, are the effect of their environment in which they find themselves represented as marginal figures in the male-dominated spheres of political power and opposition. Thus they face a double bind which they have to negotiate in a culture of survival.

⁶³ Banks, 411.

⁶⁴ *TH*, 105.

⁶⁵ See Senkoro, *The Prostitute in African Literature*.

Conclusion

Looking at the way Soyinka and Mda inscribe identities, significant differences emerge. Soyinka's memorable female characters tend to function within a mythical paradigm, standing as symbols rather than as humans. It is as if to be different or to be radical requires superhuman agency to sustain the anti-oppression instinct. The sensual nature of this superhuman agency frames these women be they as callous as Rola/Madam Tortoise or as well-intentioned as Segi. The situation is the same in his novels where 'one observes the usual imbalances common to many African male writers in their depiction of male-female relationships' (Kolawole, 1994: 57).

If for Soyinka, 'the crude and self-indulgent myths which we impose on real life fail to do justice to its inexhaustible variety' (Booth, 1981: 115), his representation of women proves otherwise. They are not far removed from the conservative figures of Yoruba popular culture.⁶⁶ For a character like Segi, it is as if a 'fall' must occur to clear a space of resistance. Women like Iyaloja are entrenched in established hierarchy and so work within patriarchal culture to compromise and perpetuate the oppression of women of lesser status. And if sexual liberation equates with freedom, it seems not to amount to anything extraordinary. While the men are heroes, the women remain either sexual predators or helpers. Or in Segi's case, they are both.

⁶⁶ See Barber, 1986: 5-33. Bisi Adeyemi-Faleye, 'Shinamania: Gender, Sexuality and Popular Culture in Nigeria', in Stephanie Newell, ed. *Images of African Women: The Gender Problematic*, Centre for Commonwealth Studies, University of Stirling, 1995, 45-56. Jane Bryce, 'Women and Modern African Popular Fiction': 118-125, Bisi Adeyemi-Faleye, 'Either One or the Other: Images of Women in Nigerian Television': 125-131 in Karin Barber, ed. *Readings in African Popular Culture*, (U.K./U.S.A.: IAI/James Currey/ Indiana UP), 1997.

This puts Soyinka's idea of authenticity in problematic territory. For it seems to suggest the role of women as man's helper is a signifier of authenticity. In this way, neither Segi nor Iyaloja, standing from different poles of socially constructed identities, can voice a woman's perspective except through the boundaries laid out by the male-constituted society. There is a similarity in the argument made by Femi Osofisan as regards Soyinka's use of myth.⁶⁷

In other settings women end up losing their virginity to older men. Sidi and the virgin bride are radically different characters yet both fall under the wing of traditional patriarchy. In Sidi's case we are asked to celebrate the victory of the authentic over the artificial but the woman's concern of bride price is unresolved. Bride price for Sidi is an authentic aspect of her culture and is her prime reason for rejecting Lakunle's propositions. Baroka, not Sidi, redraws the traditional boundaries. Like Segi, Sidi's significance lies in her position between the male protagonists. As I have stated, Soyinka's women characters are better represented in his non-mythic works. They respond to their social environment.

Mda takes a more progressive approach, recognising that women suffer the same social and economic deprivation as men. No mysticism surrounds their social and familial roles. Their marginality is the result of oppression by patriarchy and apartheid. Although the prostitutes show awareness of the political contexts of their situation, desperation prevents conscientisation. But hope resides through their personal struggles. Woman (*DVR*) realises she must align with her fellow oppressed. Lady (*Girls*) understands that

⁶⁷ Osofisan, 1982: 78.

not being prepared to sit down and wait for revolution to come means starting immediately in her own small way. With this strategy, Mda opens personal space to a wider social context.

By exposing the effects of and resistance to oppression on the family, Mda shows how new identities and attitudes are formed. He shows the link between material and social conditions as they affect familial relationships and thus the need for concerted political action. Nana shakes off the remnants of her childhood to fight for and shape her future. In *The Hill*, Man resigns himself to his wife's adultery.⁶⁸ Without the financial means, Man is unable to provide for her needs and does not force the issue of traditional family ties. The same needs lead Woman to leave Soldier Two. Material need is evoked in *Girls*, where black women find white men desirable as an escape from poverty.

The historical imperatives of indirect rule and apartheid contribute to the differences in the representation of women by Soyinka and Mda. While Soyinka locates representation within his culture, Mda strips his characters of any affinities, to find their potential for themselves within the social conditions of their oppression. The legacy of indirect rule gives Soyinka a cultural confidence grounded in a nation whose independence struggle was not as revolutionary as that of Southern Africa. The pseudo-autonomy of indirect rule allowed a patriarchal conception of culture to relegate women in the home and in the social spheres. This was aided with the privileging of men under colonial rule. This creates the problem of an authentic representation of women when dealing with Soyinka's mythic plays, for colonialism does not permit an unproblematic representation.

The settler presence in Southern Africa brought about shifting definitions of ethnicity and nationality and the role of women in society. Mda's representations come out of contesting Black Consciousness' Negritude-like construction of women as mothers and out of the social conditions created by apartheid both in the rural and urban settings. Thus women in Mda's work are subject to the same treatment of oppression as men. They act as agents of change in their own right, rather than just as helpers of men. African identities of women in drama continue to be determined by the historical processes and cultural viewpoints of the writers in their geographical locations, and their post-independence concerns.

⁶⁸ *TH*, 100-1.

Chapter Six

Politics and Drama in Soyinka and Mda

In this chapter my aim is to look at the ways in which the politics of the nation is inscribed on the identities of Soyinka and Mda. I will do this by looking at how in their works the two dramatists analyse the political landscape through their characters without a set ideology and within their anti-nationalism. I have noted that both writers subscribe to humanism. Both seek to render an account of the universal from an African perspective. The local is determined by the social and economic conditions existing within a particular society. Therefore it is impossible for both writers to avoid the nation and the effects it has on identity construction in their works.

Since Soyinka and Mda cannot avoid the nation I wish to see how their identity constructions have developed alongside the politics of their respective nations. This is with a view to ascertaining how provisional their humanism is in keeping apace of developments within the nation-state. I will first look at the ways in which both writers engage with the discourses of the nation in relation to their mythic and anti-mythic approaches. After that I shall deal separately with the political inscription of identities in their works.

Locating the Social Position of Soyinka and Mda

The social and economic historical perspectives addressed in the previous chapters point to indirect rule as being responsible for differences in identity formations in Nigeria and South Africa. Due to the colonial past, the post-independence African writer engages in a recovery project, a search for an African authenticity to plot a future course for the

continent and its peoples. In the absence of the colonial masters, the national bourgeoisie that the writer most identified with became an expropriating class. Fanon highlighted this phenomenon as being particular to that of an underdeveloped bourgeoisie.¹

An antagonistic relationship developed between the national bourgeoisie and politically conscious African writers. It placed them in ambiguous territory, as their opposition was voiced from within the situatedness of the intellectual in the ruling class hegemony. The committed writer became a mouthpiece for the underclass. Soyinka's continuing political activism and Mda's anti-apartheid plays are two examples of the writer's anti-hegemonic intervention. Soyinka acknowledges the relevance of his position as an intellectual elite speaking on behalf of the underclass in his criticism of Marxist literary critics:

We are speaking here of the very morphology of intellectual base material; of the social evasion that accompanies, deep down, the process of having 'done your bit' for the downtrodden masses, for the unreal nature of any presentation of reality, the psychology of its consumers, the medium of transmission which is at once limited, distortive, an act of fabrication which draws the most committed consumer into a conspiracy of evasion. When the critic says, 'enables us to master reality,' we must demand: Who are us? Precisely what class? What are their functions? Could this us by any stretch of the imagination be the proletariat? (Soyinka, 1988: 159)

Within the circle of committed writers a conflict arise, concerning their roles and how best to contest the ruling class. This conflict, in the Nigerian context has a generational tilt. The playwrights after Soyinka's generation – writers like Femi Osofisan and Bode Sowande – worked within a Marxist paradigm that eschewed individual redemption in

¹ Fanon, 120.

favour of a social transformation.² Osofisan, for instance, reworked myths to update their relevance for contemporary society in plays like *Morountodun* (1982). Soyinka sees conflict of interests, a dishonesty of the Marxists due to their inaction. He accepts class distinction as a universal reality but, ‘What remains permanently contestable is the *universality* of concepts and values attaching to each group’ (Soyinka, 1988: 168). For Soyinka, a wholesale importation of any liberation ideology commits the same error as the ideology it seeks to displace. Like Amilcar Cabral,³ Soyinka believes that the specific nature of society must first be taken into account and any imported ideology adapted to its concerns.

Like Soyinka, Mda recognises his social position as a concerned writer and believes it to be relevant in dealing with the socially disadvantaged. Mda criticises the media as owned and run by the elite. It is constituted to benefit the elite, distanced from matters relevant to the rural and urban masses, and forcing its own agenda on these groups. This distance creates a hierarchy of those with access to media facilities and those without, and determines the way messages are shaped. International development organisations and their African representatives come across as experts whose knowledge of rural people and their needs is greater than the experience of the people they are supposed to assist. Mda says, ‘It should be clear by now that the central issue in development is the creation and distribution of messages – hence my suggestion to you that it is high time we divorced ourselves from the liberal tradition of speaking for the marginalised’ (Mda,

² See Olu Obafemi, ‘Political Perspectives and Popular Theatre in Nigeria’ in *Theatre Research International*, 7.3. (1982), 235–44. Olu Obafemi, *Contemporary Nigerian Theatre: Cultural Heritage and Social Vision*, (Nigeria: Joe-Noye: 1996). Chris Dunton, *Make Man Talk True: Nigerian Drama in English since 1970*, (U.K.: Hans Zell, 1992).

³ Cabral, 52

1994: 143). Reinforcing this stand and at the same time acknowledging his privileged position as a writer, Mda has said of his writing about the underclass:

I don't see myself as writing on behalf of anyone really. I see myself as speaking for myself. Some of the things I say happens to coincide with what many people are saying. Therefore we are saying the same things, but it just so happens that I have a platform to say those things, in a more audible way, than they are able to. (Mda, 1997: 255)

Dramatically, both writers approach their definitions of African identities through the political histories of their countries. What we see here is the grounding of African identity in the particular experiences of the peoples rather than in a non-specific Pan-Africanism. Where the early Soyinka particularises a Yoruba experience as a manifestation of a unique African spirit, Mda demythologises the African by identifying the social economic factors underlying race oppression. Ethnicity is discarded for class types that register the material poverty of the black South African along the racial divide, hence the generic names of several of Mda's characters. Mda attempts to restructure community with a sensibility informed by social conditions and conscientised responses that open up spaces for change. Community develops around the experience of oppression rather than along ethnic cultural ties or ideologies that might mediate their reactions. Mda's landscapes are barren, infertile places, alienated from the people whose hands bear its fruits on the farms and in the mines, devoid of any markers representing 'home'. Mda dramatises how the people must work to create a new community in light of the present and through it build a future. In this manner, Mda leaves identities open-ended. Like Soyinka, it is an attempt at reconnecting to an African historical path. As

such, his language is demotic and earthy for its function is to change reality and by doing so, change identities. As Roland Barthes states:

There is therefore one language which is not mythical, it is the language of man as a producer: wherever man speaks in order to transform reality and no longer to preserve it as an image, wherever he links his language to the making of things, meta-language is referred to a language-object, and myth is impossible. This is why revolutionary language proper cannot be mythical. Revolution is defined as a cathartic act meant to reveal the political load of the world: it makes the world; and its language, all of it, is functionally absorbed in this making. It is because it generates speech which is *fully*, that is to say initially and finally, political, and not, like myth, speech which is initially political and finally natural, that revolution excludes myth. Just as bourgeois ex-nomination characterises at once bourgeois ideology and myth itself, revolutionary denomination identifies revolution and the absence of myth. The bourgeoisie hides the fact that it is the bourgeoisie and thereby produces myth; revolution announces itself openly as revolution and thereby abolishes myth. (Barthes, 1972: 146)

Barthes' argument is seen in Mda's *The Road*. Farmer and Labourer are on opposite sides of the nation's reality. The former speaks from the hegemonic position; control is racially inscribed in every utterance, and furnishes his dominant relationship with the black Labourer. The consolidation of this relationship is completed in and through myth of the Boer ascendancy, with the ideology of the church justifying the violent appropriation of black land and labour. Labourer, a Southern African black refuses to enter the mythic relationship. He is from an independent nation. He has achieved a political identity through citizenship of a nation-state. But as long as economic independence is not achieved, Labourer continues to be part of hegemonic representations that associate class with race, which is why Farmer believes he has the right to determine his identity.

Soyinka accuses Barthes of using the very language he claims the bourgeoisie use to create their myths.⁴ Here again we see social position as a factor that must be taken into account when speaking for the masses. Soyinka's myth-based characters represent an order, albeit a fluid one, since it has to be distinct for us to recognise its uniqueness, otherwise it could not be the foundation for an African-centred universal humanism. The production of a particular language, by Elesin Oba (which the market women do not understand) or by Oba Danlola (where underlings of the state fear the potency of being cursed by a king), works only within the pristine culture. This is clearer when we place their rich language alongside the language of Olunde and Daodu. Though of the traditional ruling class, Olunde and Daodu are engaged in a confrontational dialogue with the ruling power. Their language reveals strategies of binary opposition, as they resist an immediate threat during a crisis. In Barthes' formulation, their language is anti-mythic.

Yet, through myth, Soyinka locates the original, natural, state of an African identity and its revolutionary character. Change involves the whole structure of the Yoruba world, which must be harnessed to combat human alienation from nature and its forces. Soyinka makes this case in *Myth*. In *The Strong Breed* we see the consequences of rigidly applied ritual, which negates Yoruba traditional practices and disables the revolutionary power it is meant to release. We have located the transposition of Ogun's ideals in his ritual plays; *The Strong Breed, Death*; but in later works we see a more varied approach to identities, located in the social sphere of the nation-state.

⁴ Wole Soyinka, 'The Critic and Society: Barthes', *Leftocracy and other Mythologies* in Wole Soyinka. *Art, Dialogue and Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture*. (Nigeria: New Horn Press, 1988, 146-178: 156.

I will now look at how Soyinka's continued use of an African-based humanism determines possible new class associations in contemporary Nigeria. The nation remains a problem for Soyinka but his later works, like his earlier satires, lay emphasis on Nigeria's socio-political problems. I will look at how Soyinka remains guided by his views on culture as recuperative and progressive, but on a wider scale of the nation. Soyinka's use of theatre against military dictatorship is another area I will discuss.

Soyinka and the Politics of the Nation

Soyinka's later works show greater engagement with the nation-state. Soyinka moves away from locating an African identity in Yoruba culture to focus on the nature of Nigerian military rule, notably on the governments between 1983-1994. Military intervention in Nigerian politics now creates a division between the military elite and the civilian populace. Soyinka employs satire to represent the military elite as grotesques to evoke disgust at their abuse of power. In this way theatre functions as art form and ideology:

Liberation is one function of theatre, and liberation involves strategies of reduction to the status and stature of the power-wielding class in public consciousness, exposing and demystifying its machinery of oppression. Representing Hitler, just to theorise, as an imbecile dripping mucus in his iconographic moustache may not be the social answer to a horrendous aberration, but it is at least more honest and less presumptuous than wishing him away as a mere figment of the socio-economic imagination. The satirist operates with an implicit recognition of the social limitations of his art; his methodology is allied to the social strategy of preparation. The mastering of reality and its transformation requires the liberation of the mind from the superstition of power, which cripples the will, obscures self-apprehension, and facilitates surrender to the alienating processes ranged against every form of human productivity. *Deflating the bogey* (emphasis mine) – this is also valid and progressive art. (Soyinka, 1988:160)

For Soyinka, ridiculing the despots in *Play* demythologises them. Identity here is important for satire works on the association between characters and their real life referents in contemporary situations. Its effect is anti-mythic.

Soyinka's poor opinion of the military is concretised by the psychological effects of solitary confinement on his person, and of the Nigerian Civil War on society. In *Madmen*, Bero's malevolence is unmediated by culture, unlike Jaguna and Oroge who are entrenched in and circumscribed by tradition. The patriarchs understand the implications of transgressing boundaries; their survival as custodians depends on strategies of limitations. Soyinka believes in myth as an agent of change, contrary to Barthes' and the Marxist critics' position. Against the denigration of colonialism and its account of Africa and its peoples, Soyinka posits 'tradition' as a counter-force:

For we are referring now to "tradition" as a lived thing, as a cohering mechanism of society, as a sum of beliefs, relationships, deployment of resources, control and exploitation of environment, attitudes to the imponderables of existence (birth and death)... in addition to the records, oral or written, of all these, their modes of representation in artistic form, and their strategies of mediation in the light of new experiences. (Soyinka, 1988: 182-3)

Soyinka's definition of tradition allies with the liberation ethics of Amilcar Cabral, perceiving culture and identity as generating from a people's relationship to the environment.⁵ Cabral asserts that national liberation is founded on 'the inalienable right of every people to have their own history' (Cabral, 1973: 43). Soyinka works within this premise with Eman whose role is determined by the influences at work in the different interpretations of the carrier tradition. Eventually, Eman becomes the carrier to defend a

helpless mute. Olunde's sacrifice opposes his father's enervating will. However, it is by emphasising the colonial intervention that Olunde's action gains significance as an act of liberation. In the face of colonial rule, Olunde performs the ritual to fortify the weakening culture of the Oyos, not to revolutionise it. His act reveals the inability of any imperial mission to completely cut off the people from their own cultural history.⁶

Soyinka analyses contemporary Nigeria and its leaders in *The Open Sore of a Continent* (1996). He documents the corruption and deceit of both the civilian and the military governments between 1979 and 1994. Events that took place under military rule provide a backdrop to his more recent plays, *From Zia, with Love* and *A Scourge of Hyacinths* (1992), and *The Beatification of Area Boy* (1995). These plays deal with Nigerian society under military rule.

The typical Soyinka identities that oppose tyranny, in or outside myth, are eloquent, professional and subversive. They break ranks with the ruling hegemony, although they remain tied to it through familial and/or economic relations, like Daodu (*Kongi's Harvest*) and Captain (*Dance*). On the periphery of power, they resort to either covert means or outright rebellion in an effort to shrug off tyranny. The characters in the more recent plays bear similarities to these types, but their identities are also shaped by the new political and social climate Soyinka writes them in. Soyinka draws the line between the

⁵ Cabral, 41.

⁶ Here I disagree with Griffiths and Moody's view that Olunde is a radical committed to changing Oyo and Nigerian society, and that he cannot make that statement fully because he has to deal with the cultural denigration that confronts him. Olunde's conversation with Jane Pilkings does not show Olunde to be committed to change. He arrives with the expectation of burying his father (*Death*, 198). He tells Jane that 'you have no respect for what you do not know' (*Death*, 192). It is pointless to see Olunde as a committed radical when he represents obviously the native intellectual's mentality 'taking a stand in the field of history' (Fanon, 1990: 168) See Gareth Griffiths and David Moody, 'Of Marx

rulers and the ruled, a distinction indicating that the liberation struggle is not over. I will show how Soyinka realigns social classes within the nation-state under a dictatorship in three of his plays.

From Zia, with Love/A Scourge of Hyacinths

Both written in 1992, *From Zia, With Love* and *A Scourge of Hyacinths* (a radio play) deal with the travails of the same protagonist, Miguel Domingo, who is arrested and detained for suspected drug smuggling. The play is based on real events that took place during the mid-1980s when three suspected drug traffickers were executed by the then military government of Generals Muhammed Buhari and Tunde Idiagbon (1983-1985). The Generals implemented a harsh regime, which was most notable for its 'War against Indiscipline' (WAI) campaign.⁷ The government was fond of ex post facto legislation, by way of enacting military decrees and backdating them. At the time, the Generals were looked upon as saviours of the nation from the misrule of the Shehu Shagari civilian government (1979-1983).⁸ Soyinka deconstructs their legacy to reveal them as a 'hypocritical self-proclaimed salvationist duo' (Soyinka, 1996: 64).

The structure of *Zia* is similar to *Opera Wonyosi*. Soyinka employs play-within-play and song to relay the underlying social conditions in which the play is situated. Again we find collaboration between corrupt civilians and the military, using the state to acquire personal wealth. But, rather than tend to *Play* in its satiric representation of the military

and Missionaries: Soyinka and the Survival of Universalism in Post-Colonial Literary Theory' in Stephen Slemon and Helen Tiffin, eds., *After Europe*, (Australia: Dangaroo Press, 1989), 79-85.

⁷ See Eghosa Osaghae, *Nigeria Since Independence: Crippled Giant*, (London: Hurst and Co., 1998), 182.

⁸ Vaughan, 316. For an account on the nature of military rule in Africa, see J. Gus Liebenow, *African Politics, Crises and Challenges*, (U.S.A.: Indiana UP, 1986), 237-266.

and its civilian accomplices, *Zia* leans more towards *Madmen*. While not as morbid - the tenebrous atmosphere is tempered by a wider representation of society and by the songs - it conveys the same pervasive malevolence. A loudspeaker pronouncing government doctrines in the form of slogans at regular intervals creates a Big Brother complex. The claustrophobia of the prison location and the death sentence hanging over the inmates' heads add to the foreboding atmosphere.

Zia opens with the prisoners performing a play of a security meeting of the ruling military council, where they portray the psychology of the military leaders. The council meeting highlights the military's mentality towards its citizens as that of an occupying force.⁹ Conveying an imagery of possession, as if the state is theirs by right, they resort to any means to facilitate their 'eternal revolution' and adopt a military aggression towards the nation. Commandant, the head of state justifies this attitude: 'Without stability, there can be no development' (*Zia*, 4). Director's (Major Awam) situation report on state security implicates social problems as the underlying cause of unrest. Similar to the tyrants in *Play*, the council members are uneducated, ignorant and anti-intellectual.¹⁰ Their animosity is an historical condition. Gus Liebenow observes that:

the rank and file and the few Africans who did qualify for noncommissioned (sic) rank overwhelmingly tended to be recruited from the areas of the country which had been least exposed to modernizing influences. Lord Lugard ... made it an explicit policy of government to draw heavily upon the less developed north for recruits in preference to the better educated and economically transformed Igbos and Yorubas in the south. (Liebenow, 1986: 246)

⁹ *Zia*, 8.

¹⁰ *Zia*, 5.

Liebenow's comments highlight indirect rule's lingering influence in post-independence Nigeria. Different regions were allocated different roles assumed to be conducive to their 'natural' state. They also add an ethnic hue to what Soyinka describes as a 'politics of revenge' (Soyinka, 1996, 64), adopted by the Buhari-Idiagbon regime.¹¹ In her civil war novel, *Destination Biafra* ([1982] 1983) Buchi Emecheta notes that the army were held in a poor light prior to and after independence. 'Only the socially disadvantaged went into the army, those who were failures financially and academically' (Emecheta, 1983: 37).¹²

Director's performance is measured by how many people he can detain and by how many organisations he can disband. Soon after, Commandant bursts into a Kongi-like speech, railing against subversives and university lecturers and full of self-righteous indignation. There is disdain for democracy and inflation of the ego.¹³

After the performance we are introduced to Miguel Domingo, one of three new inmates. The old inmates have a custom of producing a CV with a dramatic musical accompaniment. Introducing themselves, they start with Commodore 'Ayacinth whose ode reveals the intractable menace of the river-clogging weed to lives and business. Hyacinth is a metaphor for the military's strangulating grip on society.¹⁴ Before the introductions can continue the prison superintendent moves the three new inmates to another cell. As they acquaint themselves with their new surroundings a loudspeaker blares a banal message telling Nigerians to be vigilant in tracking down corruption and

¹¹ For a history of the Buhari-Idiagbon regime, see Eghosa, 163-187.

¹² These 'failures' represent the decisive changes wrought by colonial rule, as Chinua Achebe also shows. Not only do they represent social change with regard to status; like the returnees they bring knowledge of the outside world from serving abroad. See Chinua Achebe, *No Longer at Ease*, (1960; U.K.: Heinemann: 1987), 10.

¹³ Zia, 12. Compare Commandant's speech with Aafaa's play-acting speech in *Madmen and Specialists*: 227.

eradicating drug smuggling, and to 'Make BAI your watchword' and 'Be the eye of the nation' (Zia, 27).

The Big Brother complex that invites people to spy on each other is reminiscent of the Stalinist state and the Foucauldian notion of surveillance through the panopticon.¹⁵

Backed up with the unsubtle law enforcement officers and decrees to punish the smallest offence, the nation is caught in a siege mentality, reminiscent of the atmosphere produced in Isidore Okpewho's civil war novel, *The Last Duty* (1972). Soyinka's Battle against Indiscipline (BAI) is a thinly disguised turn on WAI – War against Indiscipline. WAI was hailed by many as a way of returning order to public life after the ruinous legacy of the Shagari regime (1979-1983), in which the government itself instigated the breakdown of law and order.¹⁶ The Buhari-Idiagbon regime claimed to be a corrective force.

However, Soyinka analyses their brief stay in power as nothing more than a ploy by an elite minority based in northern Nigeria to maintain its hegemony over the nation. In this regard, Soyinka calls their 1983 takeover 'a coup against the opposition' (Soyinka, 1996: 81). The opposition parties bore the brunt of the arrests, detentions and punishment while the main government figures escaped relatively unscathed. The aim was to discredit leaders from the other parts of Nigeria. According to Soyinka the military government was on a mission of vengeance against those who opposed the Shagari regime:

The upshot of the "rigidity" and corrective zeal of that reign of terror was indisputable: a partisan scale of judgement, weighed heavily against progressives, especially all those, from whatever part of the country, who were considered a

¹⁴ Zia, 20-22.

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, 'Panopticism' in Paul Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader*, (London: Penguin, 1984), 208-213.

¹⁶ *Open Sore*, 65-74. For an historical overview of the period, see Osaghae, 110-162.

serious threat to the hegemonic design of a self-perpetuating clique from the yet feudally oriented part of the country, whose leaders remain backward in their thinking, nepotistic in political orientation, a clique that is still made up largely of unproductive scions of a moribund social order... (Soyinka, 1996: 87)

Soyinka's critique is aimed at the foundational roots of the nation in the colonial order of indirect rule. The separate development policy created a nation where all the parts are greater than the whole and a national identity competes unfavourably with regional and ethnic identities. This is the true force behind the Military Voice calling for discipline and vigilance. This is the new/old order that has incarcerated Miguel Domingo and the other inmates, guilty or innocent. It is against the military wing of the hegemony that they have to contend with as Nigerians, in a nation with a weak national identity.

Emuke and Detiba are amazed that a person of Miguel's status is in prison. More surprising, he was given bail and rather than abscond, remains to attend the court hearing and is found guilty of drug smuggling. The issue for his fellow cellmates is not his innocence or guilt. They understand the contempt the military government has towards human rights. Emuke queries Miguel as to why he went to court, but Detiba's own opinion is insightful:

DETIBA: Well, it wasn't you alone. Or myself, to tell the truth. I overheard some reporters – *even lawyers* (emphasis mine) – saying the same thing... (Zia, 28)

The rule by whim of the military is further commented upon by Emuke:

EMUKE:... These soja people, I no trust them. They fit wake up tomorrow and say – line up everybody awaiting execution. Fire them one time! (*Zia*, 31).

This sets up a discussion about the very nature of military rule that ‘wait until man commit crime, then you come change the punishment’ (*Zia*, 32). Again it is Emuke who eloquently conveys the state of anxiety of the civilian population:

EMUKE: Soja man say ‘come’, soja man say ‘go’ – everything confuse! You no fit say – A-ah but na soja man say make I come. The soja wey tell you you ‘go’ done finish you because you obey soja man ‘come’. And if you try Go-come-come-go,; both of them go shoot you together. Den leave your body for checkpoint to show example. (*Zia*, 32)

This state of uncertainty operates in the same way as in *Giants*. The difference here is that it is implicated in ethnic and national politics. Soyinka addressed the social manifestation of this state also in *Opera Wonyosi*. Without a democratic base, military power strikes out aimlessly in an attempt at keeping its legitimacy unquestioned.

The uncertainty of power is evoked through the collusion between the military and the civilians. Soyinka portrays this uncertainty in the relationship between Wing Commander and Sebe Irawe. Student, a new inmate, gets himself arrested in order to escape his boss, the venomous Sebe Irawe. He has double-crossed Sebe over a drugs deal and as punishment is to be murdered. Wing Commander, a government associate, arrives to

discuss a large consignment of cocaine that he arranged to be smuggled in from Pakistan, with the help of then President Zia. The consignment, 'Fifty kilograms! Neatly packed in one fertilizer bag' (*Zia*, 49), has disappeared from its secret location. This is no ordinary drug deal, as Wing Commander explains:

WING COMMANDER: ... the people involved over there, my counterparts, they are in government. To deal with them on an equal level, I had to make them believe that it was a government to government affair. That there was cooperation here at the very highest level. (*Zia*, 51)

By making this nefarious activity a joint venture, Soyinka indicts military governments in general. They have no regard for human rights and enjoy humiliating the civilian elite, an act Sebe shows ironic admiration for.¹⁷ Sebe makes no distinction between military rule anywhere in the world, and that, 'you people make and unmake laws to suit yourselves' (*Zia*, 52). As a crook/businessman, Sebe adopts a chameleonic approach to working with the military to further his aims. Like the professional beggars of *Opera Wonyosi*, and like the sign hanging on the cell in the prison,¹⁸ one must abandon shame and thus morals to get ahead, or to escape trouble. Wing Commander points out that corrupt leadership is not the sole preserve of the military.¹⁹ Soyinka indicts the attitude of the national elite as being responsible for military intervention.

¹⁷ *Zia*, 51-2.

¹⁸ *Zia*, 3.

¹⁹ *Zia*, 54.

Like in *Opera Wonyosi* there is no difference between the crooks both in and out of uniform.²⁰ But Sebe is smarter than Wing Commander. Wing Commander is sitting on the stolen consignment, which the audacious Sebe has hidden inside a cushion. Sebe has used Wing Commander's assistance to uncover Student's duplicity.²¹ These duplicitous relationships continue the theme of cannibalism that Soyinka has addressed in previous plays. Leadership sets the social mentality of the age. Sebe and Student are only responding to the environment created by the military leadership.

Soyinka extends the scope of Nigeria's political problems to foreign intervention. The foreign powers interfere in Nigeria's domestic affairs for their own gain. Buchi Emecheta employs a similar strategy in *Destination Biafra*. External interference is a factor in Nigeria's unrest leading up to the civil war. For Soyinka, this is a continuation of the theme from *Giants*. Miguel observation links the military government's harsh policy with the hypocritical American government's anti-drugs policy.²²

The poor economic climate prevents new class formations from developing to oppose the military. Instead, the oppressed prey on each other. Warder tries to sell to Miguel and his cellmates a *juju* that can enable them to escape from prison. The desperate Emuke tries to persuade Miguel to loan him the money to purchase the charm, at Warder's own instigation. Miguel responds by showing him a similar *juju*, which of course does not

²⁰ Soyinka had noted the dictatorial tendencies of the early independence politicians. See 'Wole Soyinka Interviewed' by Biyi Bandele-Thomas, in *Conversations with Wole Soyinka*, Biodun Jeyifo, ed., (U.S.A.: U of Mississippi P, 2001), 183-197: 184.

²¹ *Zia*, 55-56.

²² *Zia*, 61.

work.²³ Desperation unites the prisoners, despite their different background. Warder who had promised to help Miguel deliver a message promptly refuses and walks away in anger at his inability to exploit their desperate situation. Warder has absorbed the predatory instincts of the dominant class, which is the national ideology. Warder employs a ‘philosophy of cannibalism... a ruthlessness towards each other’ (Soyinka, 2001: 194).

In the General Cell, the inmates conclude the play of Sebe Irawe and Wing Commander. Sebe advises Wing Commander to use his power as a member of the Ruling Council to declare a state of emergency.²⁴ Miguel and his fellow inmates are arrested under this ruse. The ‘Song of State Consignment’ reinforces the bad faith with which the military operate against the civilians: ‘No one dare embarrass/Power the pure commodity’ (*Zia*, 80). Soyinka’s previous plays, *KH*, *Madmen*, *Opera Wonyosi* and *Giants*, analysed the power lust of cretins. In *Zia* we see power channelled through an ideology of revenge, which allows the military to pass and backdate laws in order to wreak vengeance on their enemies. The campaign against drugs will be *retroactive*:

WING COMMANDER: The law, the degree, the penalties. It will show we mean business. And anyway, that’s our style. That’s how people recognize who’s in charge. That’s the difference between you and us. Civilians can only operate in linear time. We go backwards and forwards at will. (*Zia*, 81)

²³ *Zia*, 69-71.

²⁴ *Zia*, 79.

Sebe likens this circumvention of justice to the enigmatic Eshu, the Yoruba trickster god who 'throws a stone today and it kills a man last week' (*Zia*, 81). Wing Commander, like Bero in *Madmen*, has abandoned traditional beliefs for power of the gun. Sebe convinces him to pay homage to Eshu for spiritual protection and murders him in the bushes.

Though the military is the main subject of *Zia*, Soyinka addresses the coterie that surrounds and amplifies their power. Several groups have come together to either denounce the military ruling or to plea for clemency. The Church, the student's union and the Bar Association state their objection within the confines of democratic law and civility. The Traditional Rulers' Council, however, plea for clemency. The furious Miguel objects, arguing that, 'Even a retarded child must know that the issue is one of justice' (*Zia*, 97). The traditional rulers represent a dead link between the people and the government. They are alienated from their people, a fact that leads Daodu to break the royal drum in the middle of Danlola's dance in *Kongi's Harvest*. In *Zia*, the new era requires more than the grandiloquent begging and massaging of their paymasters' egos.²⁵

Time for the three detainees draws to a close. The government has removed the authority of the courts to deal with their case, which has now been referred to a Review Panel overseen by the Head of State. Without recourse to the Court of Appeal, Miguel, Detiba and Emuke are executed by firing squad.

²⁵ For a summary of the role of the traditional rulers as opposed to the professional associations and student bodies, see Osaghae, 180-182. See also Olufemi Vaughan, 'Chieftancy Politics and Social Relations in Nigeria' in *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* 24.3, (1991), 308-326.

Soyinka deals on a more concrete level with the social issues at stake, leaving behind the ambiguous mysticism that characterises his earlier work. Satire is reduced to lay bare a more human characterisation based on social, material conditions. The linguistic games are restricted to the songs and to the scenes involving Sebe. Linguistic registers delineate the characters, as is the case in previous works. Emuke's register of Pidgin English serves not as comic relief but as a commentator in his own right, on the conventional wisdom of the militarised society. He is conservative in that he accepts his own position and works within it to escape poverty. There is an awareness of the workings of his society: he cannot understand why the privileged Miguel did not flee the country when he had the opportunity. The military's unambiguous language masks their true intentions and makes retroactive law-making seem natural. Soyinka demythologises their moral posturing as false and unmasks their masquerade of eternal revolution as revenge-seeking, power grabbing hypocrisy.

With the play located in an urban area, the differentiated ethnicities are united by their oppressed state. Social standing counts for little, making possible a space in which associations may form a national identity. However, this is not possible due to the grinding poverty and the violence and insecurity caused by military misrule and its exhortation to the people to distrust each other, creating a philosophy of cannibalism among the ruled. The nation remains a problematic issue that Soyinka remains sceptical of.

But Soyinka has not abandoned completely the essentiality of the unique identity. In *A Scourge of Hyacinths*, he returns to this idea of human destiny, the recurrence of the old in the new as continuity in a cyclical scheme. *Hyacinths* is a radio play, first broadcast on BBC Radio 4 in 1991. The dynamics of radio creates a play more exegetical than *Zia*. *Hyacinths* revolves around Miguel Domingo and his mother, and explains the reason behind Miguel's court appearance and subsequent execution. Between them is the tension caused by the past. In a new era, Mother cannot relinquish the past, which is tainted by Miguel's grandfather's gambling addiction. Grandfather Domingo literally loses the family name, the only article of worth remaining on a bad night of gambling:

THE MOTHER: Finally, with nothing left which anyone would accept, he puts his name on the table. There you are he said - Double or quits. The name of Domingo against all my debts. (*Pause.*) At first they laughed, then the novelty of the idea hit them. So they made him sign a piece of paper, but there was no need. Oduaiye Domingo was a man of his word. (*Hyacinths*, 123)

This stigma of erasure is, for Miguel, a burden.²⁶ But for Mother the family motto, 'A Domingo-Is-His-Word' (*Hyacinths*, 124) is the very essence of their being. Her narration of the family history grounds the essentialism in a material act of land reclamation and development, and defence against jealous indigenes.²⁷ The retention of the Yoruba system of worship that aided their ancestor's survival during slavery in the Americas continues to support their spiritual needs back home in modern Africa. Mother cannot

²⁶ *Hyacinths*, 123.

²⁷ *Hyacinths*, 125-127.

forget this or the reconstruction of the family fortune that is synonymous with their name and its reclamation.

Torn between the past and survival under a present dictatorship, Miguel decides to run away. He is ambiguous about his mother's belief in the traditional gods; he has 'nothing to believe in' (*Hyacinths*, 128). But he is aware that her prayers and rituals and the family's connections have little power over the leaders who will pronounce judgement over his life:

MIGUEL: It is not your goddess who has pronounced a threat on my life. It is not any maid or mother of the waters but men of studded boots, of whips and batons and guns and mind-numbing propaganda. Why! Even Sango armed with his thunder and lightning would hesitate to take on a sub-machine gun. (*Hyacinths*, 129)

In Soyinka's mythic world of heterogeneity and growth, there is space for arbitration. This is inimical to the interpreters of African modernity whose retention of power relies on intransigence to change. It involves an interpretation of the past appropriate to their needs to legitimise their power. The weight of this modernity bears heavily on Miguel as much as the weight of the past burdens Mother. He reminds her of what she has always reiterated, that 'this is a society of short memories' (*Hyacinths*, 130). Miguel wishes to make his escape. He has a choice of places to settle around West Africa, since his family links are sub-regional. As returning Africans, the Domingo family embraces a Pan-

African identity. But the hyacinths, whose 'embrace suffocates the nation' (*Hyacinths*, 120) thwart his escape by sea.

Hyacinths provides the background for Miguel's travails in *Zia*. He refutes the burden of the past like Eman in *TSB*, but is consumed by a rapacious, self-serving hegemony. Like Olunde, he is debased by the dominant power that has only disdain for the people they govern. Unlike Olunde, he does not try to re-establish continuity with the past. Miguel lives in a society so far removed from its own culture, a society of short memories. Myth and recuperated history prove inadequate against a rapacious modernity.

The Beatification of Area Boy

In *Zia*, Soyinka showed how Nigerians have become a single class of the oppressed by the military. In *The Beatification of Area Boy* (first performed in 1995),²⁸ Soyinka looks at the possibilities of cooperation between intellectuals and the underclass to oppose the military and their civilian cohorts. This position is representative of the African writer who has broken away from the middle class to align with the poor in the face of the moral bankruptcy of the ruling elite. Sanda, the university graduate works as a security guard for an upmarket shopping centre in Lagos. He is also the leader of a band of area boys, the term used to describe the masses of unemployed young touts who roam the urban areas. The play pivots on two events that occur on the same day: a society wedding and the displacement of slum dwellers.

Soyinka dwells on many themes, joining the Nigerian experience with that of Latin America.²⁹ The military is shown to inhibit the development of democracy by forming

²⁸ All references to the 1999 edition.

²⁹ *Area*, 287.

political parties as a way of retaining power.³⁰ Again, he employs song to explain the contemporary issues of the day.³¹ Soyinka's outrage at the military's behaviour is explicit in the scene where Military Officer wants 'nothing less thoroughly than the Ogoni treatment' (*Area*, 311)³² in dealing with the area boys. Again, Nigeria is shown to be a nation under occupation by its own armed forces. By forming a link between the intellectual and the underclass as a solution to this problem, Soyinka does not show what new forms of identity this association may yield, but rather how they might crystallise.

Sanda's involvement with the area boys stems from the mismanagement of the ruling elite that has placed Nigeria in poverty and destroyed the financial security of the middle class. The nation-state benefits the few at the expense of the majority. Education is no longer sufficient for social and political advancement.³³ The trampling on civil rights enforces the military's disdain for the educated, which Soyinka has shown in *Giants* and *Zia* and characterises as a politics of revenge. It is shown in the military's belligerence towards the general public. The Civil War is a recurring motif, from Mama Put's recollections of the actual conflict³⁴ and in comparison with the forceful removal of the slum dwellers.³⁵ The displacement is also likened to the famine-induced situation in

³⁰ For an account of the lengthy transition to democracy process that led to the military forming the political parties, the annulment of the elections and the attending crisis that followed, see Eghosa, 207-266. See also Maier, 69.

³¹ *Area*, 294-6. The refrain, 'a little to the left, a little to the right' refers to the ideological premises the military government adopted for its two invented parties.

³² For an account of the Ogoni conflict, see Human Rights Watch/Africa. Nigeria – *The Ogoni Crisis: A Case-Study of Military Repression in Southeastern Nigeria*. New York: human Rights Watch, February 1999. Karl Maier, *This House Has Fallen*, (London: Penguin, 2000): 75-110.

³³ Oshomha Imoagene locates the importance of education in Nigeria's class structure: '...three major classes seem to characterize the Nigerian scene as follows: the ruling and middle classes, the peasant class and the working class. The ruling class is made up of the various elites of the public and private sectors, i.e. the bureaucratic, military, intellectual, business, professional and most of all political elites. The basis for recruitment to this class is mainly education.' Imoagene, xi.

³⁴ *Area*, 247.

³⁵ *Area*, 301.

Ethiopia³⁶ but it resembles the forced removals of apartheid South Africa. For Mama Put: 'It's war of a different kind. It is war of a kind governments declare against their people for no reason' (*Area*, 302).

To fight the war of resistance, Sanda opts for the artful dodger approach, extorting and stealing money from the rich patrons of the shopping complex. Sanda is an in-between character forged out of the condition of the nation. He was a socialist in his university days³⁷ and has found trying to help the poor through the civil society overwhelming. The state and the civil society are one and the same, working through each other for the benefit of the few.³⁸ Sanda is alienated from his class and commits himself to help the underclass. Eric Bentley states that commitment involves alienation and that the two should not be seen as opposites:

If a commitment, as I have suggested, properly implies a radical protest, then it is not likely to be made except by those who have already made a radical break. And what we may call making a radical break could also be seen as a process of recognizing that a break has already occurred: one was too alienated, one was repulsed and rejected, and, knowing it, one rose up, a rebel against the alienators, against the alienating society. (Bentley, 1968: 201)

Even though he is against the hegemony, Sanda is not completely alienated in this manner. He works on the margins of the system, one that the state allows to exist so as to ease unrest. The state is the conduit through which ill-gotten gains are won and dispersed to the corrupt civil society. The post-independence state runs on a patron-client system whereby those who acquire power distribute favours and largesse to their supporters only.

³⁶ *Area*, 302.

³⁷ *Area*, 275-6.

The incestuous relationship between the military rulers and the civilian elite is the same as their relationship with criminals like Sebe Irawe and Anikura. Their brazen attitude allows for a power display of outrageous contempt for the poor.

The arrogance of the elite is shown in their attitude towards the underprivileged and towards the nation. The major streets leading into the business district of Nigeria are to be closed for the society wedding of two elite families. Broad Street and Balogun Street are also the main routes in and out of Lagos Island. The bride-to-be, Miseyi, is Sanda's former university sweetheart. During this period, a million people are displaced from a slum area to make way for an estate of luxury homes. The spectacular sunset of the morning was the military destruction of the slum settlement. Judge, a Professor-like character (*The Road*), goes off to seek a solution to the problem and ends up in the boot of a car, awaiting punishment by a group of soldiers for touching their officer's uniform.

The marriage takes an unexpected turn when Miseyi renounces her family and status to elope with Sanda. The offended families promise to deal with Sanda who is left with a carpet of money sprayed all over the floor during the proceedings. Sanda decides that the money should be used to help the displaced rebuild their lives. He acknowledges that a general social reconditioning is needed because: 'Before a new crisis is over, another has been hatched' (*Area*, 326). Sanda and Miseyi decide to live with the displaced people and start setting the country right from there.

³⁸ Imoagene, xi. Kilson, 391.

Soyinka does not depict heroes in any of his non-mythic plays except for *Area*. Sanda is atypical of Soyinka's social and cultural hero. He is not framed by myth, which underpins the actions of Eman and Olunde's moral absolutism. Rather he responds directly to the material conditions around him. He drops out of university to help the poor. His pessimism leads him to sophisticate the area boys' extortion racket. But the Maroko residents' plight is too great to ignore, although it is only when they are left with the cash from the wedding that Sanda's dream of making money to help the underclass materialises. Sanda responds to the social realities rather than operates to an ideology. His idealism has been tempered by experience. He sees changing society as a step by step approach of working with the underclass. There is no full blown revolution: Sanda wants to fight for compensation for the displaced residents and set up a music band that will diversify from singing subversive songs only.

Sanda's subversive attitude dilutes the untapped power of the common people. His identifying with the underclass offers a way of forming new identities conscientised to fight the military government, but he is still very much the artful dodger, for Sanda uses his intellect within the present social context. Soyinka creates the impression of the area boys and the displaced as a counter-force to the military, but with Sanda as the leader its potential is not fully realised. Sanda's in-between identity ignores the inconsistencies in fighting the entrenched interests on their own terms. There is still much individualism in this social hero:

MISEYI: What can we do with the military still around?

SANDA: They won't always be there.

MISEYI: Who is going to remove them?

SANDA: You see, there is already plenty for us to think about. And plan towards. And two heads are better than one...

MISEYI: I've always wanted to found something worthwhile.

SANDA: Well, here's your chance. Why don't we go in and raise a toast to that?

(*Area*, 329-330)

The multitude of the displaced provides a force to fight the military but they are not given that possibility. Sanda and Miseyi are not alienated enough from their class to engage in radical ways of appraising their situation. For although Soyinka is averse to ideology, he recognises class as 'a universal reality'.³⁹ Soyinka rejects the wholesale appropriation of Western discourse into class analysis in Africa, but the impression is that working with the people as Sanda intends to means the lop-sided "banking" concept of education' (Freire, 2000, 53). Despite the critical analysis of society by Mama Put, Trader and co., it is mainly Sanda, Miseyi and Judge who have the last scene and it is Sanda who is hailed as the 'King of the Area Boys' (*Area*, 328).

Sanda's leadership of the area boys unveils shifts in identities caused by economic recession. National historiography is rewritten in the city, the space of reconstituted identities. This is where we can site the area boys and Sanda the intellectual, in the 'urban memory' (Triulzi, 1996: 80) as a source of multiple interpretations that is 'rooted in

³⁹ Soyinka, 1988: 169.

individual and group identities that no longer recognise themselves in the Great Tale' (Triulzi, 1996: 80) of the nation:

In this context of institutional crisis, and the wider crisis that involves national historiographies themselves, new battlegrounds open up for the clash between official traditions and group memories, between social praxis and the building of identities, that in some way restore to post-colonial society a negotiating power that was earlier supplanted or removed. Its recovery is part of that 'revenge on the state'. (Triulzi, 1996: 80).

Revenge on the state is taken by a coalition of disparate classes. Sanda's dominant role does not convey a culture specific trait, as Soyinka's attention focuses on the experience of the heterogeneous nation. Instead, Sanda's role betrays a class perspective that is unwilling to shed all its attitudes. Again leadership is a major concern, which Soyinka shows through Sanda. Sanda is representative of the educated class putting their knowledge to the aid of the lower class. Their knowledge, international in outlook, is still very much based in Westernised pedagogy, rather than on the situation that confronts them. The space for transformation of identities is under-utilised.

I now turn my attention to Zakes Mda's attitudes to the nation and his role in drama in the post-apartheid era.

Mda and the Politics of the Nation

In this section my aim is to appraise Mda's theory and theatre in post-apartheid South Africa. At a time when South African politics had yet to enter its reconciliatory phase Mda had already constructed situations of post-independence disappointment, of the kind being written in parts of independent Africa, where an indigenous middle class gained

power.⁴⁰ His resistance theatre pieces were already addressing the concerns of women and the rural areas; concerns that were not engaged fully by Black Consciousness writers in their deliberate effort at constructing a race-based uniformity. The ending of liberation politics opened new areas for theatre to address.⁴¹

I have shown how Mda's exile in Lesotho created a distance that allowed for a subtler exposition of the black situation under apartheid. Exile is also one reason for his favouring of the region over the nation-state. Mda's anti-nationalism comes from the same source as Soyinka's. It is a rejection of the colonial structuring of African society. Mda has stated that he finds nationalism 'inhibiting and destructive' (Mda, 1997: 258). He also states that, 'It is a force that I am afraid of, be it Afrikaner nationalism or African nationalism. I am not a nationalist in that sense' (Mda, 1997: 258). Rather, Mda considers himself as a 'person of the world,' (Mda, 1997: 258) but subscribes to the Pan-Africanism of the African National Congress. Mda's rejection includes the structures of indirect rule and the apartheid construction of bantustans, with their ethnic fictions. Yet events in apartheid South Africa were central to the regional outlook of his dramas. His concerns were for a post-apartheid South Africa and the fear of other oppressions that had been ignored while combating racial oppression. Mda was not the only commentator about the relationship between the arts and society in a post-apartheid era.⁴² These views were expressed around the time of Nelson Mandela's release from prison in 1990, which marked the onset of negotiations for majority rule. These views sought a role for the arts

⁴⁰ Lazarus, 20.

⁴¹ Kruger, 1999: 191.

⁴² See Njabulo Ndebele, 'The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa,' in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 12.2, (1986), 143-57. Albie Sachs, 'Preparing Ourselves for Freedom: Culture and the ANC Constitutional Guidelines,' in *The Drama Review*, 35.1, (1991), 187-93.

that would reflect society in various forms other than in what had been limited by resistance theatre.

Where the plot revolves around the urban and rural dichotomy, for instance in *The Hill*, Mda provides a glimpse not only of the deleterious effects of South Africa's economic dominance in Southern Africa. He also emphasises the social inequalities existing within Lesotho society itself, where the social institutions set up by colonialism to exact control over its people are now employed against the economically deprived. Mda exposes this scandalous situation by significantly using the discussion of a tax raid. Whenever there is a raid, the safest place to hide is in the rich areas where the residents are never disturbed.⁴³

By using the tax raid to highlight the inequalities of post-independence Lesotho, Mda shows that little has changed in the way the rulers exploit the nation's resources and its underclass. The attitude of the wealthy towards paying tax reveals their exploitative designs on the nation-state. The burden of nationalism is on those who are yet to see its benefits. In this regard, the poor have little option but to sell themselves for immediate gain, further reducing their capacity to accumulate wealth or contribute to developing their nation. Long-term prospects lie in their dependence on the South African economy. The selling of blood for money shows this to gruesome effect.⁴⁴ The exploitative national bourgeoisie and the exploited underclass combine to create a dependency effect on the nation as a whole.

⁴³ TH, 84.

⁴⁴ TH, 85-86.

Mda's fear of a middle class appropriation underlies the concern for the position of the formerly oppressed to have a voice in the running of the state. The worry is that the state adopts the mentality of the elite. We see this problem through Fanon's critique of the middle class. Though Fanon grants that the mentality of the national bourgeoisie is conditioned by the colonial system, he describes their attitude as 'stupidly, contemptibly, cynically bourgeois' (Fanon, 1990: 121). Fanon also points out that the way in which the middle class treat the underclass is similar to the way the colonialist treated the native. 'The settler never stopped complaining that the native is slow. Today, in certain countries which have become independent, we hear the ruling classes taking up the same cry' (Fanon, 1990: 156). The rejection of this claim to know the native, what Chinua Achebe refers to as the 'Mr I know my Africa' syndrome, is what Black Consciousness and resistance theatre set out to counter. Mda portrays this attitude in *The Hill*. In a play-within-play, Man assumes the role of a wealthy doctor who wants his neglected garden tended to. When he is told the labourers can only work for a few days he erupts in self-righteous indignation:

MAN (*angry*): For a day or two? You are no different from the rest. Day after day I am plagued by tramps who want employment for a day or two. Hundreds of them each day. A day or two, that's all they want. Suppose I were to go to the superintendent at Queen Elizabeth II Hospital. Suppose I were to ask him to give me work.

'I am a physician.'

‘Experience?’

‘Ten years as general practitioner and one year as a specialist.’

‘We need doctors desperately. We’ll take you at one thou five hundred per month. I’ll confirm it with the Permanent Secretary for Health.’

‘I am sorry sir. I only need work for a day or two.’

I ask you, wouldn’t they think I am mad? (*TH*, 76)

The doctor’s lack of empathy with the labourer’s situation highlights the ways in which class inhibits national identity from developing, in that their concerns are radically opposed. As part of the dominant group, Doctor’s ideology, backed by the infrastructure of the state and civil society, makes his views the conventional wisdom. It is similar to the ideology of the erstwhile colonial rulers, and so race ideology is insufficient in developing a national identity after liberation. *WSF* presents a similar situation, where class relations determine national identities in the post-independent state. Mda shows how this attitude can affect relations among the same classes in *Girls*. The clerks who are meant to oversee the smooth distribution of rice to the poor instead ensure its delivery into the hands of unscrupulous businessmen and women. By so doing, they align themselves with the expropriating class and serve to perpetuate their own oppression.

Mda’s pessimism serves not to debase the black anti-apartheid movement but to expose the flaws in ideology as a whole because ‘Oppression has no hierarchy’ (Mda, 1994: 145). It can develop even in liberation movements. Constant vigilance is needed. Fanon

observed this fact when he stated, 'Nationalism is not a political doctrine, nor a programme' (Fanon, 1990: 163).

Before determining how Mda points the way forward, I will show how he confronts the most pernicious manifestation of colonial oppression – apartheid – head on. By looking back to an earlier work, I wish to suggest that the implications for a post-apartheid South Africa are rooted firmly in race relations and its negotiation. Steve Biko, during the 1970s noted that, 'The arrogance that makes white people travel all the way from Holland to come and balkanise our country and shift us around has to be destroyed. Our kindness has been misused and our hospitality turned against us' (Biko, 1987: 70) Wole Soyinka, in his Nobel Prize lecture, made a similar observation of the African's 'largeness of spirit' (Soyinka, 1994: 19) which has been abused by colonialism.⁴⁵

Soyinka warns that this seeming 'uncritical capacity of black patience' (Soyinka, 1994: 19) is conditional and will disappear if there is no reciprocity. Mda's pessimism hangs on this peg, that the oppressive instinct is part of the political ascendancy of the Afrikaner, which informs their identity and cannot be removed without breaking down the complex that sustains it. Black identities are shaped by the response to this complex. This comes across clearly in *The Road*.

⁴⁵ Wole Soyinka, 'Nobel Prize Lecture 1986: The Past must Address its Present,' in A. Maja-Pearce, ed., *Wole Soyinka: An Appraisal* (U.K.: Heinemann, 1994), 1-21: 19.

The Road

First presented in 1982, *The Road*⁴⁶ deals directly with race difference⁴⁷ and its negative influence on human relations. Mda shows how rooted racism is in the political and economic structures that maintain the state in South Africa. This inextricable link conditions the minds of both Farmer and Labourer and determines their relationship and thus fixes their identities into binary opposites. Mda highlights the mainstay of his dramatic project: region, family and religion. Through a series of misunderstandings, the Afrikaner Farmer and the black Labourer tell their stories from their own side of the colour divide. Afterwards, they realise that they have something in common: Labourer's wife, Lucy. It is this shared experience that leads Labourer to kill Farmer.

The play opens with Labourer under a tree shouting out to his lost dog, Bhekile. It is the lost animal that sets off their discussion, for Farmer once employed a rebellious farmhand by the same name. Farmer does not realise that Labourer is black and so engages with him on the level of familiarity, the idea being that they are united by race. By doing so he exposes his prejudices as a white supremacist. The self-opinionated Farmer describes everything and everyone within his own narrow frame of reference. Over and over he iterates the kind of person he supposes to be. 'I am a very kind man' (*TR*, 123), 'As you know I am fair and just' (*TR*, 138). The next moment, his actions disprove his words. He reveals to Labourer that he is a serial adulterer who can no longer make love to his wife after he caught her having an affair with his foreman, the *kafferboetie*, Boetie van Rensburg. Farmer's hatred for him is total: 'One day I'll kill him. He is a disgrace to the

⁴⁶ All references to the 1990 edition.

Afrikaner race' (*TR*, 129). Farmer's hypocrisy is revealed, for he is also a respected member of his church.

Farmer's hatred of his ex-foreman is because not only has he committed adultery with his wife and beaten him up, to add severe injuries to insult. Boetie van Rensburg has had sexual relations with black women. By sleeping with Farmer's wife, he has defiled her. Yet the hypocritical Farmer has confided to Labourer that he has a black mistress.⁴⁸

Farmer tells Labourer this secret on the misunderstanding that Labourer is a black-loving white liberal, and by having this in common, they are friends.⁴⁹

Though they are ideologically different, because Farmers supposes Labourer is white, it matters very little, for apartheid is based on race solidarity. Farmer's mind is shaped by the apartheid policy of segregation, which also involves the need to 'know' the other through stereotyping of racial identities for the purpose of control. Through Farmer, Mda ridicules the racist mapping and the presumptions that emanate from it. He also shows how ideology cannot encompass the whole of human experience. Farmer claims to know the difference between Japanese and Chinese, yet, at first, he cannot tell that Labourer is black.⁵⁰ The cleverness of the Boer racist ideology extends to distinguishing between Taiwanese of Chinese descent and Mainland Chinese 'Because they are communists and we don't trade with them' (*TR*, 149). Several times, Farmer keeps changing Labourer's identity. He is first a compatriot, then a Jewish liberal, then a South African black, and

⁴⁷ For a view on the impact of race in theatre and society see, Ian Steadman, 'Race Matters in South African Theatre' in Richard Boon and Jane Plaistow, eds., *Theatre Matters: Performance and Culture on the World Stage*, (U.K.: Cambridge University Press, U.K., 1998), 55-75.

⁴⁸ *TR*, 128.

⁴⁹ *TR*, 131.

finally an immigrant worker. In every situation, Farmer strives to gain the upper hand in proclaiming his knowledge as superior simply because he belongs to the dominant group.

Labourer, on the other hand, shows the difficulty for a member of the oppressed group to be outside politics, even through choice. Forced into a dialogue with Farmer and then forced to vacate the shade of the tree, Labourer is always at cross-purposes with his antagonist. Labourer's dog was a present for his wife, to keep her company during his sojourns. The dog was really meant for acts of bestiality between Lucy and Farmer.

Farmer appropriates Labourer's property, thus mirroring the wider dispossession of blacks in South Africa. Labourer is forced to the wall and has no means of fighting back because Farmer is armed. He understands the many levels of oppression that has to be contended with till he finally proclaims violence as the only avenue left. Christianity is again criticised as part of the race hegemony. Labourer sees Jesus not as a saviour of the poor. Rather, 'He was a pacifist, therefore he was anti-revolutionary. "Turn the other cheek... Give unto Caesar..." That is why the revolutionary Jews killed him' (*TR*, 136).

The ownership of the productive forces in society comes under scrutiny when both give different opinions of the same farmland. The signifying landscape is a typical strategy that Mda employs to depict the dispossession of blacks and their alienation from the sources of production. It also mirrors their psychological and physical condition of displacement through forced removals and the seeking of refuge. In this instance, it is a matter of viewing the landscape through state ideology and position, of ownership and

⁵⁰ *TR*, 149.

dispossession. The loading of experiences on the land causes the dissonance, created by talking at cross-purposes. Farmer sees the richness of the land in its cultivated fields, Labourer sees only a desert, 'Nothing, not even an oasis' (*TR*, 143).

Robbed of the shade of the tree because of his colour, Labourer is a subject, and not a citizen of the state. He must develop separately, and be 'the king of the sun' (*TR*, 134). Labourer's threatening talk is a type of guerrilla tactics on its own. For example, in this exchange with Farmer:

FARMER: I have a gun, you know.

LABOURER: There are many ways of winning against a gun. For instance, I could stealthily move in whilst you are asleep, take your gun and... (*TR*, 135)

Farmer and Labourer agree on using violence to achieve their conflicting aims. Labourer had previously eschewed violence, but has had to review his position in the face of Farmer's aggression⁵¹ Both agree that the liberal approach to the South African situation is a dead end. And so they are 'locked in ghastly combat with one another' (*TR*, 126). Their striking differences show that, in their society, there is a 'chasm of engineered ignorance, misunderstanding, division, illusion and hostility. It is a chasm that highlights the tragedy of people who have long lived together, but could do no better than acknowledge only their differences' (Ndebele, 1990: 3).

⁵¹ *TR*, 127.

But it is not the political issues which are joined into group associations, with Farmer's *volk* recollections and claims of race purity and Labourer's history, which is buried, 'Awaiting reincarnation, or resurrection' (*TR*, 149) that initiates Labourer's decisive act. It is the claims of the personal that draw the play to its violent conclusion, when reconciliation is impossible. Farmer sets the terms of opposition, calling Labourer a communist. The terms Farmer sets to return to Labourer his rightful possessions⁵² is Mda's way of foreshadowing the terms set for majority rule in South Africa, where the minority negotiates from a position of economic advantage.⁵³ The only guarantee is that racial segregation normalises binary relationships among the different groups, and all they will share in common is the use of violence to change the political landscape. Farmer's intransigence also causes his paranoia towards any threat, perceived or otherwise. He is on edge whenever Labourer is out of his sight or speaks of violence, something he cannot come to terms with.⁵⁴ His fragile hold on power is based on a need to know and categorise the other *a priori*. If liberation politics is 'a social epistemology based on extreme opposition with its resultant tendency to yield instant knowledge' (Ndebele, 1994: 2), then it is a reaction to years of oppression that has rewritten African history in step with colonialism and Afrikaner ascendancy.

Mda's apocalyptic vision is discomfiting to oppressor and victim alike. By showing the victim overcoming his oppressor through the same means of his oppression, Mda leaves

⁵² *TR*, 138ff.

⁵³ See Richard Wilson, *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: Legitimizing the Post-Apartheid State*, (U.K.: Cambridge UP, 2001). Lyn Graybill, *Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa*, (U.S.A./U.K.: Lynne Rienner, 2002).

⁵⁴ This is because, as Carolyn Duggan notes, Labourer is a 'foreign' black and is therefore unused to behaving in a subservient role the South African black is forced to adopt. 'He expresses the selfhood of a person devoid of a sense of race/colour and is understandably baffled by Farmer's change of attitude after the colour recognition scene'. See

us without the slogans of solidarity that can act as a buffer to the naked human desires that both Farmer and Labourer exhibit throughout the play. Slogans act as a buffer by erasing the personal and emphasising liberation ideology to which the oppressed work towards together. The political consciousness of the immigrant Labourer does not suffice to kill Farmer. It is Farmer's appropriation of his wife that leads to the final action. The report of the gun may lead us to cheer Farmer's demise but it also unnerves us. While Mda shows that 'Armed resistance is thus seen, as in *Dark Voices Ring*, to arise out of the contradiction inherent in the prevailing relations of power, to the inevitable, if possibly cataclysmic, result of too many missed opportunities' (Horn, 1990: xlv), he also makes us think twice about the very nature of armed resistance, violence and power. *The Road* can thus be seen in the context of post-apartheid identity formations as much as his plays set in post-independent Southern Africa.

Mda and Post-Apartheid Theatre

The explicit violence that ends *The Road* is untypical of Mda's plays, which tend to glimpse a possibility of redemption after a bleak unfolding of events. This fear of 'too many missed opportunities' is present in his writing on post-apartheid society. As a writer of Black Consciousness drama, and given the nature of his exile from South Africa, Mda's engagement with the post-apartheid era had already been stated in his post-independence work. It evoked in him the anti-nationalism that is crucial to his humanist thinking. This, as I have already stated, places Mda's drama at a critical juncture with other Black Consciousness writing. Through his drama, Mda reiterates the plural nature

Carolyn Duggan, 'Things of Darkness: Character Construction in the Earlier Plays of Zakes Mda' in *Alternation* 4.1. (1997), 27-44: 36.

of oppression. By engaging resistance theatre in this manner, Mda prepares society for regeneration after apartheid, which marks a continuation of the conscientisation started by Black Consciousness. Theatre now should cease to function as a weapon of liberation but continue its educational role in preparing South Africans for majority rule.

Post-apartheid theatre reflects the desire of South African society to come to terms with apartheid and majority rule. It also aims to move away from overtly political themes to deal with the personal. Nelson Mandela's release occurred at the time when the institutionalisation of resistance theatre in the prestigious city venues was complete. Mda says of this, 'By 1990 almost all relevant theatre of the Theatre for Resistance category was performed only in city venues, and the audiences were white liberals and a sprinkling of members of the black middle class who could afford to drive to these expensive venues' (Mda, 1994: 5).⁵⁵ Productions such as *Woza Albert!* and *Sarafina* (1986) gained international reputation and became the face of South African theatre.⁵⁶ In this way African dramatists were already looking towards opportunities for international exposure and finding ways of achieving mainstream success.⁵⁷

Post-apartheid theatre can be dated from either Mandela's release in 1990 or from the return to majority rule in 1994.⁵⁸ The restructuring of South African society involves reconstituting national identity through democratic guarantee of individual and group

⁵⁵ Loren Kruger shows that this move from the township to venues such as the Market and the Space theatres began in the 1970s. See Kruger, 1999, 154-5.

⁵⁶ Kruger also points out that the institutionalisation of political drama such as those of Maishe Maponya and Matsemela Manaka 'found a readier response among metropolitan audiences than among township residents'. Kruger, 156.

⁵⁷ For an example of the rocky road to dramatists redefining themselves in the post-apartheid era see, Bernth Lindfors, 'The Rise and Fall of Mbongeni Ngema: The AIDS Play' in Blumberg and Walder, 181-91.

⁵⁸ Kruger, 191.

rights. Individual rights are aided by the ANC's refutation of socialism in favour of liberal capitalism. Group rights include the accommodation of regional rule, the official acknowledgement of local languages as national languages, and the making of a Rainbow Nation. This approach is couched in the slogan, 'Many Cultures, One Nation'. Thus the political project of Black Consciousness ends with the fracturing of the political black identity into ethnic and racial groups, and individualism. South African theatre production has to also function within this new dispensation, hence its engagement with issues relevant to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).⁵⁹ This is seen in plays dealing with bearing witness and analysing the nature of truth and guilt, plays such as Athol Fugard's *Playland* (1992) and the collaborative experimental *Ubu and the Truth Commission* (1997). The political validity of these works – typified as Theatre for Reconciliation – is in their keeping with the historical mood of the nation after apartheid. Of the place of theatre Mda is unequivocal:

Suggesting that the arts have a role to play in transformation does not mean censoring artistic freedom. Whether we like it or not, the artists will always respond to the prevailing political and social conditions because they select their material from society... Politics is part of their intimate daily experience, and for better or worse, politics will feature in their works. (Mda, 1995: 38)

Mda here implies that the role of theatre in post-apartheid South Africa is still politically relevant. As Mark Gevisser states, 'In these post-apartheid days, all South African cultural production seems to be strung between the poles of "truth" and "reconciliation."' And these are not the idle categories of a cultural critic: they are key political principles used to define life in South Africa since its passage to democracy' (Gevisser, 1995: 10).

⁵⁹ See Hazel Barnes, 'Theatre for Reconciliation: David Lan's *Desire* as an interventionary Vehicle', Blumberg and

But given the past relationship between the state and theatre, key questions arise.

Gevisser worries that in the neocolonial states, the new elite appropriates culture to create its own idea of a national identity.⁶⁰ The history of South Africa's oppositional theatre, of course, does not allow for such simple appropriation, yet this is an issue that cannot be resolved easily. This is more so when taking into account the nature of President Thabo Mbeki's African Renaissance project.⁶¹

Mbeki's African Renaissance, by emphasising the black experience is directly juxtaposed against the aims and objectives of the TRC. While the former refers to group identification in terms of Black Consciousness rhetoric, the latter seeks to heal past wounds through individual acts of restitution, leaving the state in whose name atrocities were committed relatively unscathed.⁶² While one speaks the language of justice, the other speaks the language of reconciliation. Mbeki's rediscovery of the past initiates a similar literary ploy being used by writers in looking at the present.⁶³

While the Theatre of Reconciliation dwells on the key political initiative of forging a new collective morality, other theatre practitioners have engaged themselves with the personal themes that represent personal issues, which have been subsumed by the wider politics of

Walder, 169-80: 170-1.

⁶⁰ Mark Gevisser, 'Truth and Consequences in Post-Apartheid South Africa' in *Theatre* 25.3 (1995), 9-18, 11.

⁶¹ 'In a 1998 speech promoting his projected "African renaissance," Thabo Mbeki... underlines the idea that "[to] perpetuate their imperial domination over the peoples of Africa, the colonisers sought to enslave the African mind and destroy the African soul". Mark Sanders, 'Truth, Telling, Questioning: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull*, and Literature After Apartheid' in *Modern Fiction Studies* 46~1, (2000), 13-41: 14. See Thabo Mbeki, 'The African Renaissance Desperately Needs Your Help' in *Cape Times*, 17 August 1998, 2: 13.

⁶² See David Atwell and Barbara Harlow, 'South African Fiction After Apartheid' in *Modern Fiction Studies* 46~1, (2000), 1-9: 2.

⁶³ Atwell and Harlow, 4.

race oppression.⁶⁴ Plays such as those in the collection, *Black South African Women's Plays* (1999), look at various issues that directly affect women in different social aspects.

Mda's dramas of the resistance era had started looking at the post-apartheid society through the post-independence situation of African nations, specifically Lesotho.

Sergeant and Janabari, and Woman and Lady all express dissatisfaction with black self-rule. In *Girls*, though, there is a desire for change through self-agency. But Mda's post-apartheid output has been mainly in writing novels. Works such as *She Plays with the Darkness* (1995), *Ways of Dying* (1997) and *Heart of Redness* (2001), look at the role of individuals finding a place in the post-apartheid era. They also present Mda an opportunity to redefine himself as a novelist. Of this switch, Mda says:

I don't see myself as a playwright anymore, I see myself as a novelist. I will write a play only when I am commissioned to do so. But I won't go out of my way to write a play because I don't find them challenging anymore, especially now that I have started writing novels. (Mda, 1997: 257)

Mda's attention to writing novels represents a desire to narrate the South African experience through its new emphasis on individuals and their shifting identities in a multicultural era. Mda had already placed emphasis on individual experience in his plays, written during apartheid. It is also an attempt by Mda to secure a position as an international writer. His works present a universal humanism, in the absence of the particular features of race oppression. Of his approach to novel writing Mda says, 'I just get down to writing. I do not tell myself that I should be writing African literature that

⁶⁴ Kruger, 191-216.

should be written as a black or a white. I have a story to tell and I tell my story' (Mda, 1997: 257).

Grant Farred comments on Mda and his role as a novelist:

Ways of Dying's artist represents Mda's attempt to carve out a new space for black writers in postapartheid South Africa, a mode liberated from the incessant political demands placed upon the disenfranchised authors in the anti-apartheid struggle. However, such a conception of the black artist is problematic because it is founded upon the fallacious commensurability between the achievement of the postapartheid state and the upliftment of the historically disenfranchised black underclass. The end of apartheid may have created new possibilities for black literature, but it did not signal the onset of economic equality in South African society, and the ongoing inequity that affects every aspect of settlement life. Much as sub-Saharan anticolonial literature found itself confronted with both new and disturbingly familiar challenges in the postcolonial era, so postapartheid writing will have to (re)negotiate its relationship to a black underclass whose living conditions resemble the historical disenfranchisements of the apartheid past. (Farred, 2000: 187)

Irene Visser has a different view. Also reviewing *Ways of Dying*, Visser sees Mda as answering Ndebele's and Sach's call for artistic freedom away from resistance literature.

On Mda's leaving names of leaders and of places unspecified she comments:

This deliberate withholding of specific historical details, no longer necessitated by state censorship, may be interpreted as a new emphasis on the autonomy of art. For not only does the novel's focus on the experiential and the personal constitute a release from the former political demands on resistance literature, but in its eventual orientation towards the future of post-apartheid South Africa, it also invites an engagement with wider issues than the historical, local or personal. (Visser, 2002: 39)

Given the humanistic sensibility of Mda's plays, it seems appropriate that he moves in the direction his prose has taken. But as Farred says, and Mda himself has said, the writer

must still maintain a political role. If liberation is incomplete as Mda's post-independence plays suggest, and the reasons for being so are apparent in South Africa, then theatre should not yet lay down its arms. Mda continues to address the concerns of the general public through other literary and artistic forms. Theatre for development remains an ongoing concern as a political aesthetic. This is an area I have already touched on. Here I expand on Mda's application of this medium in post-apartheid South Africa.

Mda and Theatre for Development

Identity constructions continue through Mda's work in theatre for development. Mda seeks to return to those outside the privileged space of the urban middle class a voice through which they not only claim their right to identify themselves, but also the direction they wish to proceed in as regards developing their own resources. By rejecting the familiar top-down approach of government information transmission, the focus shifts from Western-based global interests of the national elite to local interests of communities. Sustainable development proceeds from this local perspective. This is important in post-apartheid South Africa, where the popular electronic media, sporting events and international conferences are painting an image of cosmopolitanism, promoting the nation as a haven for multi-national investment, whose direct benefits exclude the many. Theatre for development is also important to the post-apartheid era in that it can assist in the government's Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) through self-help schemes.

Mda sees theatre continuing to play a prominent role in Southern African society. 'After liberation, it will join the task of nation building' (Mda, 1989: 482).⁶⁵ Mda marks the period for the beginning of theatre for development in Africa: 'Developmentalism becomes the concern of post-colonial societies when popular politics comes to an end, and the new nation states begin to mobilise the populace for what the leadership refers to as nation building (in South Africa, reconstruction)' (Mda, 1998: 258).

A problem arises as to the nature of government-directed nation building/reconstruction and the way in which it uses theatre to disseminate its message. Penina Muhando Mlama observes:

Governments have been content to patronise only that theatre which will not question the exploitative and oppressive structures characterising most of independent Africa. And generally they have taken a position that sees the arts as a luxury which the new nations cannot afford. But in truth, this is meant to mask the potential of the arts to challenge the corruption and injustices of the ruling classes. This explains why even though the governments argue that the arts are a luxury, they have always found the resources with which to maintain active censorship boards and other systems to keep the arts that depart from the arts for art's sake function in check. (Mlama, 1991: 14)

By dismissing the arts as a luxury, African governments acknowledge their conscientising power, having witnessed its contribution during the liberation struggles.⁶⁶ This leads them to control information. Mda seeks to address this problem through a theory of communication as a basis for theatrical production of development issues in *When People Play People* (1993).

⁶⁵ Quoted in Jan Gorak, 'Nothing to Root For: Zakes Mda and South African Resistance Theatre' in *Theatre Journal*, 41. 4, (1989), 478-491: 482

⁶⁶ Kerr, 209-239.

Mda states that the modern communications systems ‘transmit the values and the ideology of the ruling elites’ (Mda, 1993: 1). Mda calls for the decentralisation of the communications systems in order to provide rural peoples with a means of producing and distributing their own messages. For Mda, theatre is the most effective means of building an indigenous communications system. ‘It is not centralised like the technological media, and is capable of integrating indigenous and popular systems of communication that already exist in the rural areas’ (Mda, 1993: 2). Because of the importance of communication in modern society, primacy must be given to the ‘theatre function as a communication mode’ (Mda, 1993: 3). Communicologists should play a greater role than theatre practitioners and non-formal educators. Placing theatre within a communications paradigm, Mda shifts response to messages away from the individual and from studies in attitude and behavioural change. Instead:

My argument is that the locus for change is not set within the individual, and problems of underdevelopment do not lie with villagers as individuals who are ignorant and traditional, and who must therefore be stimulated into action. Failed development lies within larger political and economic structures. (Mda, 1993: 4-5)

For Mda, change at the individual level comes about only when the existing larger social structures are changed. Thus he echoes Augusto Boal, who asserts that:

Of all the arts and sciences, the sovereign art and science is politics, because nothing is alien to it. Politics has for its field of study the totality of the relationships of the totality of men. Therefore the greatest good – the attainment of which would entail the greatest virtue – is the political good. (Boal, 2000: 21)

Boal is also concerned about the nature of communication and top-down dissemination. Boal's influence on Mda's approach is considerable, from the dramaturgical techniques to the theory of handing the tools of communication back to the people. The Latin American influence in Mda is not confined to Boal. *Joys of War* was written after Mda returned from a theatre-for-development workshop in Central America.⁶⁷

For Mda, the present communications system highlights the different values and interests of the rural and urban dwellers. Non-political government agents in the field 'still display certain values and ideas, most of which have been inherited from colonial days' (Mda, 1993: 11). These agents 'assume that all native practices must be replaced by modern ones from Europe' (Mda, 1993: 11). By moving further away from traditional practices, a culture of reliance evolves through what Paulo Freire calls cultural invasion. Cultural invasion creates cultural inauthenticity, a necessary base for the oppressed to 'respond to the values, the standards, and the goals of the invaders', leaving them to 'necessarily recognise the superiority of the invaders' (Freire, 1993: 134).

Mda cites an example of such devaluation of cultural values. An underprivileged child felt embarrassed to narrate a Chakijane trickster folktale in Zulu because his fellow students had narrated European folktales in English.⁶⁸ This is why Mda emphasises control of media resources as paramount in the drive towards self-reliance and self-development. But the hierarchical order of communications systems is not just a problem with oppressive governments. The liberal attitude of doing something for the people must

⁶⁷ Peterson, xiii.

be also discouraged. as he states, 'It is crucial that we wean ourselves from the liberal notion of "doing something" for the people. Sustainable development will only happen if we do something *with* the people' (Mda, 1994: 142). These structural problems that generate uneven centre-periphery relations, create the dependency culture of the rural areas.

To create messages that allow the people to become actors in their own drama, to become conscious of their conditions and their power to effect change, Mda emphasises the role of the catalyst.⁶⁹ We see the catalyst at work in his complete dramas, in *Woman (Girls)* and *Man (DVR)*.⁷⁰ We see also the open-ended conclusions as well. The struggle continues; there is no end of history *à la* Francis Fukuyama. But as in the pedagogical study of the underclass by Freire, human limits are set by the dominant classes as ossified tradition and essential human nature, making transformation seem impossible. These are the negative uses of myth that Mda seeks to break.

Woman (Girls) and *Man in (DVR)* serve as catalysts, raising the consciousness of Lady and Woman. By narrating the historical conditions of their situation, they initiate transformation. By showing that social positions are not the inevitable outcomes of an essential condition, they extend the discourse of anti-oppression from the particular to the universal. Mda's concern with the shaping of new identities in post-apartheid South

⁶⁸ See, Zakes Mda, 'Learning from the Wisdom of Ancients: In the Creation and Distribution of Messages' in *Current Writing*, 6. 2, (1994), 139-150: 139-140.

⁶⁹ *WPPP*, 20-21.

⁷⁰ They are also found in his novels. See Margaret Mervis, 'Fiction for Development: Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*' in *Current Writing* 10.1 (1998): 39-56.

Africa within a developmental paradigm is seen in *Ways of Dying*.⁷¹ Despite the fact Mda has chosen the novel form, his themes are similar to those of his plays.

When People Play People documents the activities of the Marotholi Theatre group, a group that specialises in development theatre ‘productions’. Mda’s case studies show how such a project might work in actualising the communications theory of theatre. The book serves as a useful document in development studies and in proactive ways of creating new identities. It serves as a logical progression in his work and in continuing the use of theatre as an integral part of people’s lives in Africa as a whole.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to show how Soyinka and Mda address identity formations within post-independence/post-apartheid political developments. For Soyinka, I have analysed the politics of his more recent works through his polemical writings. His political writings are reflected in his dramatic themes of the military in government. Though he sees satire as useful for ‘deflating the bogeyman’, the works analysed move away from outright parody and ridicule, featuring more realistically conceived identities formed by their social historical setting. In *Zia/Hyacinths*, Soyinka re-examines the legacy of the Buhari/Idiagbon regime and debunks their salvationist claims. In *Area*, he takes a social group normally regarded as miscreants and places them as a catalyst for social transformation.

⁷¹ Lenta, 39-56.

Soyinka's dramas against the then increasing militarisation of Nigeria retain his earlier discourses on power and corruption. Soyinka continues his promotion of Yoruba/African culture as a way out of Africa's political impasse and as a tool for international reconciliation.⁷² But by turning to the social present, Soyinka's identities are formed not by a mythopoeic unity but by their social position in society. Thus, ethnicities are subsumed and class is relegated to show how all Nigerians are treated in the same manner by the military and their civilian collaborators. Here Soyinka offers hope in bringing together these disparate groups to forge a new morality against the oppressive state.

By looking at *The Road*, written in the apartheid era, I have tried to show how Mda's vision of intransigent race oppression will end and its consequences for society. Its relevance lies in the events that have taken place in Zimbabwe, for Mda's post-independence plays have always pointed out that liberation does not end with the attainment of self-rule. Thus, I positioned the work alongside his plays that project the post-liberation future. The pessimism of *The Road* stems from the maxim, violence begets violence, and it serves as a warning to everyone concerned about the handling of race relations in a modern African state.

I also looked at Mda's theories and his position as a writer in post-apartheid South Africa. Mda's decision to concentrate on novel writing rather than playwriting is interesting in light of Farred's comments. The low level of education among black South Africans means that they are not his immediate market. This indicates a bid on his part to seek an international audience. Yet, as we have seen, it is in keeping with the new avenues sought

⁷² See Wole Soyinka, 'Faiths that Preach Tolerance', in *Guardian, Saturday Review*, 4 May 2002, 3.

by some prominent black dramatists of Black Consciousness. It is also keeping with new identity formations in South Africa with the shift from liberation to liberal capitalism.

Mda focuses on theatre for development for rural development in post-apartheid South Africa. By providing a process for democratic ownership of communication systems, rural dwellers gain the power to determine their environment outside the dominant global forces and their local agents. Mda's work in this regard places theatre as an integral part of African development rather than being just a cultural product.

Mda's critical writing addresses the end of liberation politics, truth and reconciliation, and reconstruction. In these writings Mda retains the Black Consciousness attitude to theatre as a political tool for re-inventing society and thereby shaping identities. The advent of majority rule in South Africa made Mda focus his attention more on the nation-state, although he still believes in a Pan-African/universal identity. But as a writer, who focused attention on South Africa even while in exile, he has followed the route of post-independence writers like Soyinka to address the issues in his immediate environment.

Conclusion

Throughout my thesis I have tried to engage with the way the historical condition of colonialism through indirect rule has marked different creative constructions of identity in Nigerian and South African drama. Wole Soyinka and Zakes Mda both tend to specific areas of universal humanist persuasion, as a way of escaping colonialist historiography in determining their concepts of African identity. Yet both submit their characters to the social particularities of the political landscape. Both accept that the universal is expressed through the local. By creating identities as figures of resistance within their communities, they portray change as desirable yet problematic. Both wrestle culture from tradition, to continue the historical march of individuals to self-realisation within their communities. Community is still what joins them with other African writers who have embarked on this search since independence.

Soyinka embraces myth while Mda rejects it. Indirect rule allowed cultures to develop on their own. Yet indirect rule was active in shaping ethnic identities. It was neither innocent nor altruistic in its organising of peoples into administrative areas. The scars of ethnic violence across the continent give the lie to its supposedly objective gesture of apartheid. But it is here that we find Soyinka forging identities, out of these traditions, showing the transformative power of Yoruba culture outside Eurocentric traditions, derived intimately from the Enlightenment. This is what makes his calling the colonial factor in *Death and the King's Horseman* merely incidental problematic. It falls perilously within J.F.A. Ade-

Ajayi's description of colonialism as 'just another episode'. Indeed within Soyinka's recurring cycle of stupidity, this is so. Hence it serves as a warning. Within global relations today, Africa is very much a junior partner. In its Diasporic manifestation, people of black African descent in general are still looked upon in the same way as their underdeveloped continent: with either pity or disdain. This cannot be regarded as merely incidental to our concerns for a better world, which is what Soyinka has fought for and personally suffered for.

In the latter part of these two careers we observe certain changes. Mda is moving into the fields of myth and magic realism in his novels. Grant Farred's critique of *Ways of Dying*, worries if the post-apartheid situation is one in which South Africa's problems have suddenly disappeared.¹ Margaret Mervis's critique of the same novel views it as a continuation of Mda's theatre for development concerns.² Mda is still writing plays,³ but his attention seems to be focusing on becoming an international writer in the same vein as Soyinka and Nadine Gordimer.

Soyinka's work continues to destroy the myths of power that surround military rulers.⁴ His move away from mythic themes to those of national concerns does not mean a total shift in focus. Soyinka still believes in the power of Yoruba traditional faiths to provide a

¹ Grant Farred, 'Mourning the Post-Apartheid State Already? The Poetics of Loss in Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*' in *Modern Fiction Studies* 46~1 (2000), 183-206.

² Margaret Mervis, 'Fiction for Development: Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*' in *Current Writing* 10.1 (1998), 39-56.

³ For a review of his latest, *The Bells of Amersfoot*, see Guy Willoughby, 'Ideas in Exile,' *Mail and Guardian Online*, June 28 2002. <http://www.chico.mweb.co.za/art/2002/2002jun/020628-ideas.html>.

⁴ For a review of *King Baabu*, see Guy Willoughby, 'Not so Great Dictator,' *Mail and Guardian Online*, September 6 2002. <http://www.chico.mweb.co.za/art/2002/2002sep/020906-not.html>.

humanistic approach to the world's problems.⁵ Soyinka's ideals remain embedded in his culture. But he uses his theatre to continue his opposition to ideological practices that ask one to deny oneself to take up a particularistic view of society. Resistance for Soyinka comes with a challenge to authenticity. The challenge comes from abuse of power.

Mda's anti-mythic approach falls within Barthes' theory, that myth hides nothing. From this point, Mda shows just why race ideology is a myth that is impossible to hide, why it must keep its narrative going at all costs because it is always found out. Social transformation through conscientization will reduce it to the sum of its parts, to be rendered obsolete by history. The transforming agency in Mda is to further expose these myths, both of Afrikaner nationalism and of Black Consciousness, countering both by the personal testimonies of those excluded from their discourses. Mda's individuals make their own narratives. These narratives peter out when faced with reality. For Mda reality is not harsh, it is reality plain and simple. Therefore it is conditional, malleable. In keeping with his anti-nationalism, conscientization releases its powers of change by placing self-agency within individual power.

⁵ See Wole Soyinka, 'Faiths that Preach Tolerance,' in *Guardian, Saturday Review*, May 4 2002, 3.

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